The Novels of Richard Pryce

Christopher
Jezebel
The Burden of a Woman
Elementary Jane

ELEMENTARY JANE

By RICHARD PRYCE

Elementary Jane was born white-souled. She was born law-abiding, constant. Life did not always run smoothly for her; but as her circumstances changed her character did not alter — it never occurred to her that it could.

At seventeen, Jane went to sing in London music halls. Into the easy, artificial atmosphere she took her principles, so much a part of her that she hardly realized she had them. She was too pretty and too sympathetic not to make friends, and with some of those who sought her acquaintance her principles made a difference. Jane could not change, so those who became her friends loved her for just what she was, and she had a curious little circle.

The appeal of the story is the idyllic appeal of constancy. Among her kind-hearted, easy-going companions, the equally kind but more steadfast character of Jane shines like a flame, and her fashion of meeting the hazards and temptations of stage life stands out unique in its simplicity.

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Elementary Jane

Richard Pryce

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RICHARD PRYCE

Although "Christopher" is the only one of his books which is widely known in this country, Mr. Pryce is not a "new novelist." In England, he has been a successful writer for many years, and the books now published in America are not the amateur attempts of a budding genius but the ripe products of a quick mentality and a carefully trained talent. "Perceptivity," one might say if asked to name the author's leading characteristic, and a whimsical tolerance which is a natural accompaniment of keen insight. As a delineator of female character Mr. Pryce has no superior. He thoroughly understands woman nature and describes with equal facility all types in all circumstances. He has a happy faculty of setting his characters in surroundings peculiarly fitted to emphasize their individuality. Jezebel is expatriated among her own people; Elementary Jane keeps her simplicity in the artificial light of a London music hall; Mary Redwing clings to her standards in the midst of the narrow ideals of a little Welsh village. They are all superbly human.

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CHRISTOPHER.
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HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
BOSTON AND NEW YORK

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The Riverside Press Cambridge

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CHAPTER I

WHEN the silence had lasted for some moments the girl said again: —

"Jane Smith, sir."

"I know," said the agent; "I'm thinking."

A few seconds more were ticked off by the dusty clock on the mantelpiece. Jane employed them in thought, too, but timidly as if she were not sure that she had a right to think at all. She looked at Mr. Paton nervously and fiddled with a button on one of her gloves.

"H'm, that won't do," he said at length.

"No, sir."

"Eh!"

"I said, 'No, sir.'"

The agent smiled — to himself.

"What shall we call you?"

He was amused. She took him so seriously.

The girl grew red. She had not a quick imagination. The ordeal of the interview with the man who got people "salaried engagements" assumed, or threatened to assume, alarming proportions. A sudden sense of loneliness possessed her. She had never before had to think for herself. At a thought of this

and of her mother whose death, not a month back, had left her alone in the world, she bit her lip, and the big blue eyes, the beauty of which had had their part in gaining for her the agent's attention and his tentative promise to see what he could do for her, filled with tears.

"Bah, I'm only joking, dear, there's no hurry about that," he said. "You won't want a name at first. I shall be seeing a gentleman to-night about a spectac'lar affair at the Old Kent. I've got to find thirty ladies for him and p'r'aps I might get you on in that lot. You 'll have to work."

"I 'm not afraid of that, sir."

"Well, we 'll see. Look in on Monday at two-thirty."

He pressed the knob of a hand-bell, and Jane as she left the dingy room heard him tell the boy who came in from the outer office where sat the half-dozen other clients, whose bold yellow hair had so much alarmed her as she timidly waited among them, to show in Miss Alfie Le Roy.

Jane groped her way confusedly down the dark staircase which she had ascended with such trepidation. The interview had been less terrible than she expected. Mr. Paton had spoken kindly to her. He had been altogether less formidable than she had anticipated. Still her brain was whirling. The playbill which had adorned one of the walls in the dingy room, the crowded writing-table, some faded photographs (Jane called them "photos") on the mantelpiece, near the dusty clock, the rug with a hole in it

before the hearth, and the place that marked the loss of a button upon the agent's coat, were dominant in the impressions left upon her. How her heart had beaten in the cheerless anteroom! The other girls had looked her up and down. She was a novice, but not such a novice as they thought, for had she not played a frog one year in the Bradford pantomime? That was when she was nine years old, and her father, who had taught her to dance and to sing, had been one of the stage carpenters at the house in question. After his death, her mother and she had drifted out of the theatrical atmosphere, and it was only on being left alone that Jane turned her thoughts to the stage. Mrs. Smith, a mantle-fitter before her marriage, had returned to her profession on becoming a widow, and by dint of much hard work and many self-denials she had contrived to leave Jane a few pounds. With the slender capital which these constituted, Jane timidly faced the world. In the old days, during the life of her restless father, there had been frequent talk of the "boards" as her ultimate destiny, but with his death this ceased, and Mrs. Smith earned enough to allow the discussion of the girl's future to be put off from day to day. Jane helped at this time with needlework and odd jobs of a light nature. These, however, did not afford a means of subsistence, and she saw and answered Mr. Paton's advertisement. To her good fortune the agency chanced to be genuine, and she was spared the costly experience of falling into the clutches of a bogus firm.

The name Alfie Le Roy rang in her ears. "Miss Alfie Le Roy." She said it to herself again and again, and wondered which of the young women had answered to a name so gorgeous. Was it the girl with the pink gloves, or the one with powder? Mr. Paton's clients had presumably the artistic temperament and all used powder, but of those represented one stood out for Jane from the rest by reason of the prodigality of her facial decoration. Some of the girls knew each other. Scraps of their talk recurred to her: Bessy Pwang had been engaged for a second boy at the Hoxton. Her brother, the one with the sandy 'air, was n't up to much. The way he 'd served that girl was something crule. It was a wonder Bessy stood it, being only a half sister as you might say. Kitty Vince was doing a show at the Sultan's with her feller. She had luck, that woman had! The sketch was written for her by F. Banton, Esquire. It was a big dror, and you could n't wonder with his name to it. There was a deal in a name.

This took Jane back to the subject of her own; Jane Smith. Mr. Paton had said (and she took him seriously) that she could not be known as Jane Smith. Well, something would come, you might depend! Jane's spirits were rising wildly. Every yard that took her homewards increased her excitement. She had broken the ice. The worst was over. She must find a good name, of course. There was Brown and there was Jones (on the spur of the moment she could think of no names but such as designated her own

humble acquaintance). There was Green. She knew a Miss Green at the post-office. There was Kerridge. Her landlady's name was Kerridge. Jane was not sure what her Christian name was, for at the end of the letters Jane wrote for her sometimes to the daughter in service, she was "Your loving mother, Mrs. Kerridge." Jane was inclined to think it was Phœbe. But she did not think Phœbe Kerridge would do—nor Lilly, nor Mabel, nor Maud. There was Binder, the grocer at the corner where her mother had dealt, saying that you could always trust Binderses butter: Phœbe Binder, Lilly, Mabel, or Maud Binder? None of these had the right ring. Alfie Le Roy had the requisite distinction. Bessy Pwang was vivacious, and even Kitty Vince was not without a sprightly charm.

Jane lodged in a dingy South London street. The house was one of a row of three-story buildings of smoky brick. A line of pots containing the withered remains of plants long dead stood in the window of the lower room. Behind them a woman was standing, looking, at the moment of Jane's approach, up the street. She left the window hurriedly, and a heavy soft-shod footfall was to be heard in the passage before the door opened.

"Did ye see 'im, child?"

Jane's bright eyes and her flushed face answered her.

"Come in and tell me all about it. You've got back sooner than I expected. Come by tram, I s'pose? You 'ad to walk from the corner where I said, did n't y'? Ah, I thought so. Well, it ain't far,

and you 'ave n't been gorne above hour an' a 'alf, 'ave y'? What did 'e say to y', dear?"

"He said first of all that there was n't much to be done with novices, and he asked me if I could sing and dance."

"Well, you can sing," said Mrs. Kerridge reflectively, "and yer father taught you to dance from a child, for that your dear mother 's told me times and times."

"He told me to try over something I knew," said Jane, "and would you believe, I could n't think of anything. I did feel a silly. He said, 'Come, you must know something if it 's only "Home, Sweet Home," ' so then I thought of 'White Wings,' and I sang the chorus part of that, and he said he believed I 'd do, with a bit of teaching."

Jane's eyes sparkled, and she began to talk more rapidly. She told Mrs. Kerridge with enthusiasm of the thirty ladies that were to be found for the forthcoming production at the Old Kent, and of the possibility of her being chosen amongst them. The future looked rosy, and Jane built castles in the air. Why, some music-hall singers made twenty and thirty pounds a week.

"You shall have the nicest silk dress I can buy if ever I get a big sal'ry, Mrs. Kerridge, and a mantle the same as that one we saw that day in Oxford Street — you know, the one with the bronze beads."

"Bless yer little 'eart," said Mrs. Kerridge. "P'r'aps I shall live to see you ride in your bro'ham yet. Well, it 'll be a proud day."

She took the kettle off the fire as she spoke and proceeded to fill the earthenware teapot.

"You'll be glad of a drop of tea, I d'say."

But Jane was too much taken up with her recent experiences and the vista that was opening out before her to pay much attention to physical needs, and she took the cup from her friend in abstraction.

"There was one thing. I've got to get a new name. He says Jane Smith would never do, and so I've got to find one. Jenny'd do. What's your name, Mrs. Kerridge? Phœbe, is n't it?"

"That's right."

"It's the Smith that won't do," said Jane. "I shall have to think, shan't I?"

But Jane had no imagination, and when she got the engagement at the Old Kent Theatre to walk on in a procession (at twelve shillings a week) she had not thought to any purpose, and she was known on the salary list amongst Ethel du Canes and Maudie St. Aubyns and Rose de Loraines as plain (albeit exceedingly pretty) Jane Smith.

The change therefrom to Jenny Tandem came on this wise. When the engagement came to an end Jane went once more to the autocrat of the dingy room. After some discussion and a small and not dishonest inroad upon her meagre capital, it was agreed that Jane should learn two songs and a dance, when she would be qualified for an early turn at any hall that might offer. The songs, the music and words of which with their exclusive rights were obtained from

the author at the modest rate of ten and sixpence apiece, were duly instilled into the little singer. One was of the "Serio" order and the refrain ran thus: —

"In the lane where the violets nestle,
In the lane where the lilies grow,
When Jack comes back from his vessel,
He will meet me again, I know;
Hand in hand we will wander together,
For his heart beats true, it is plain,
On the deep blue sea
He is thinking of me,
And the day when we 'll meet in the lane."

Jane thought this very beautiful. Her big eyes always took a far-away expression when she hummed it over to herself. "Nestle" and "vessel" did not bother her, nor even the banal "it is plain" vex her soul. The sentiment of the words struck a chord that was already vibrating in her elementary little heart. A short dance expressive of nothing in particular followed the last verse. Jane was to wear an "accordian" pinafore, symbolical of youth and innocence and the country, and adapted to a quick change to the boy's dress which would be underneath it in readiness for her second song. In tights, and what Mr. Paton called a "Newmarket," Jane was far less at home. She did not feel a bit the "reckless Johnny" which she described herself. But she learnt the song in a certain parrot-like way. She was a guileless little thing, and she did not understand much that the nods and winks which she was taught to employ as she sang it were intended to suggest.

Mr. Paton told her of the tentative turn he had secured for her at a little music-hall in Camberwell.

"And *now* this name of yours," he said with a grave smile, for hitherto he had been joking, and, Jane always taking him seriously, the subject had afforded him considerable amusement.

"I can't think of anything," said Jane. "Won't you tell me one?"

Mr. Paton paced the dingy room. He went to the window. He had a vulgar habit of trite quotation, and he said:—

"'What's in a name?'"

Jane said, "What, sir?" but she did not mean, "What, indeed!" She had not caught his words, that was all.

"Jane would do," he said presently, and ignoring her question, as so often he did, "because you can make it Jenny. There 's lots of Jennys"—he threw up the sash—"that 's a pretty turn-out, that. Quick, or you 'll miss it."

Jane sped to the window and was in time to get a view of the high cart and sleek chestnuts.

"One in front of the other," she said.

"Pretty thing a tandem," said Mr. Paton.

"Tan—?"

"Tandem. Have n't you heard of driving tandem!"

"Tandem," repeated Jane as if she liked the sound of the word. Then she began to make futile little observations. The red wheels looked nice, did n't they?

and the gentleman's coat was just like the one she was to wear in her Johnny song.

"Ah," said Mr. Paton, "you must always be on the lookout for suggestions. That's as good as a lesson, that is. That young feller that's just drove by is what you've got to feel you're representing when you sing the song. I wish we could put just a spice of the devil into you for it. You want to be cheekier, you do. Think if you was one of these young swells with youth in your veins and money in your pockets, would you care a damn for anybody?—not you! That's what you've got to feel. See him swing round that corner?"

Jane's mind ran on the term she had just heard. She said tandem was a funny word.

"Tandem," said the agent, "tandem. It's a good-sounding word. Why, there's a name for you at once. Jenny Tandem. What more could you want?"

Miss Jenny Tandem! It was better than Bessy Pwang; better than Kitty Vince. Jane was not sure that it was not even better than Alfie Le Roy.

CHAPTER II

IT was Jenny Tandem then and not Jane Smith who did a nervous turn near the very end of the programme at the Camberwell Palace of Varieties. She followed directly upon the famous Merino Family, and had been watching their last feats (they were acrobats) from the wings, with a thumping heart.

It nearly thumped its way into her mouth when she heard the chairman (the Camberwell Palace of Varieties clings to a chairman even now!) strike the marble of the table at which he sat, with his mallet, and say loudly:—

"Ladies and gentlemen, Miss Jenny Tandem will appear next."

The announcement was not received with any rapturous applause. The rat-tat-tat-tat of the chairman's mallet made a mechanical pretence of enthusiasm, intended, it would seem, to lead the audience into clapping, as a bird-organ is played to bullfinches to induce them to pipe. The hour was getting late. There were but two more items upon the programme. A few people here and there had begun to move, but for the most part the patrons of the Camberwell Palace of Varieties liked the full worth of their money, and the hall was not yet appreciably emptier. Jane of the thumping heart (Miss Tandem of the bills) found it in her to wish that her turn had come

on at the other end of the evening and was safely over. The embryo artists played here as elsewhere to the possible disturbance of a filling or an emptying house. Of the two places on the programme, the latter and later had the advantage. Nevertheless, when Jane knew that her moment was come, she felt she would willingly relinquish the better position to know that her ordeal was behind her instead of ahead.

She trembled painfully for a moment. Mr. Paton was in one of the two dingy boxes hung with tawdry lace that flanked the stage. He had taken the trouble to come and see how she would acquit herself. It was very kind of him, but the knowledge that he was there increased tenfold her nervousness. The orchestra was playing the opening bars of her first song. The second time they were played she would have to run on. Would she have the courage? What if she broke down? The drum in the band made the tune sound nice, did n't it? It would all be over soon, anyway, and she would go home with Mrs. Kerridge. When she got home she would have succeeded or failed. How strange it was! A flying thought of her mother came to her. She closed her eyes for a moment. It was now or never. It was now . . .

At the chairman's announcement the occupants of a certain seat in the body of the hall exchanged rapid glances. The group consisted of an elderly woman with a very pink face and a rusty crêpe bonnet; a young woman, a young man, and a little boy of six

or seven who was called 'Arry, it would seem, and who wore a suit of crimson plush of the kind known as Little Lord Fauntleroy, and had a cap with a shining peak. These people had displayed a certain suppressed excitement all the evening.

Mrs. Kerridge with the pink face now whispered to her niece Mrs. Atwell that she was "come over all of a heat."

The young man, the niece's husband, leant across his wife to deliver himself of "What say?"

"Aunt's nervous. I tell her it'll be all right. Won't it, Joe?"

"I'm tremblin' fit to make the bench shake," Mrs. Kerridge whispered.

Joe said that Miss Smith sang "a treat," he considered, and prophesied success. He called his wife's attention to their little son, who was eating a biscuit desultorily and with much crumbling, and who showed a disposition now to wriggle from one lap to another.

"Sit still, 'Arry, there's a dear. You'll see better where you are. Look at 'ow you're messin' your kike all over auntie's dress. Say, 'I beg pardon, auntie.'"

"Tsh! There she is!" said Mrs. Kerridge. "Well! I would n't 'a' believed!"

Jane had made her appearance.

She looked very fresh, and sweet, and childish. If her talent was open to question and she originated nothing, she did all that she had been taught very cred-

itably. Fifty girls were singing the same sort of song, if not (as I think) in the same sort of way, about London; but, as she swayed to the waltz-time of the refrain, the tune being reminiscent of a hundred and one others, the audience caught it up, and the last time they sang it for her: —

"On the deep blue sea
He is thinkin' of me,
An' the d'y when we 'll meet in the line."

Her second song did not take quite so well. To make it go was wanted all that she lacked. But "The Lane where the Violets nestle" had put the house in good temper, and so Jenny Tandem had her little success.

Mr. Paton met her at the wings as she came off.

"You 'll do," he said.

"Oh, sir."

"You 'll do."

He button-holed the manager, with whom he seemed to be on friendly terms.

Jane slipped away and changed her dress. Her heart was still beating fast, but for very different reasons than those which had set it a-beating a few minutes since.

Mr. Paton and the manager were waiting for her when she emerged in mufti from the little dressing cubicle at the side of the stage.

"We 've something to say to you — me and Mr. Isaacs," said the agent. "I've been able to do a stroke of business for you, Miss Tandem."

Jane flushed.

Before she left the hall her engagement had been extended to five weeks.

Mrs. Kerridge meanwhile, her anxiety over, had become expansive. It was not many moments before every one who sat near knew of her proud connection with the singer. For the benefit of all who cared to listen she became biographical. She addressed her conversation to her niece and looked round occasionally to observe the interest of outsiders. Her niece Mrs. Atwell supplied all the proper questions and said, "Just fancy!" or "Only to think!" at intervals.

"'Ear that, 'Arry? She was n't much older than you when she played in the pantomime at Bradford. You 've seen a pantomime, 'ave n't-cher? Why, of course you 'ave — and been to the theatre again and again. You 've seen Miss Tandem act too." She jogged his memory. "At the Old Kent, that piece was. You know — where all those young ladies come in with the pretty flowers. Kind auntie took you, did n't she, like she 'as to-night? Say 'Thank you, auntie.'"

"'Er po'r mother did n't seem to fancy the stage," proceeded Mrs. Kerridge. "Such a nice-spoken lady she was. She 'd a goodish bit put by, y' know. You could 'a' seen that by 'er fewn'ral. Me an' po'r Miss Tandem an' her two cousins from 'Ighb'ry was in the first carriage. An' you an' Joe an' little 'Arry here was in the second, was n't you?"

"Yes. You remember that, 'Arry, don't you? It

was a lovely ride, was n't it? Auntie gave you an 'an'kerchief with a black border, did n't she? Want to go to 'is dadda? Little fidget! 'Ere, take 'im Jow. I never see such a child to worry."

Mrs. Kerridge gave a supper-party in honour of Jane's *début*. Thereat Jane, flushed and pale by turns, excited and pensive, made an interesting and, in her black dress (she was still in mourning), pathetic little heroine of the hour. The fare was humble. There were pork chops ('Arry was seriously indisposed in the morning), a cold apple tart, and a piece of American cheese (from "Binderses"). There was stout to drink.

Mr. Atwell proposed Jane's health. He said:—

"It gives me great pleasure, Miss Smith,—I should say Tandem,—on beyarf of the ladies and of myself—"

His wife interrupted him.

"Don't forget 'Arry, Jow. You ought to 'a' said 'and the gentlemen,' did n't 'e? There 's 'Arry. You 're one of the gentlemen, my precious, ain't-cher, like y'r dadda? Want a bit more cheese? Wait till dadda 's finished, then."

Mr. Atwell accepted the amendment.

"On beyarf of the ladies and the gentlemen—"

"Say, ''Ear, 'ear,' 'Arry!"

A fork was thrust into 'Arry's hand, and he was shown how to thump with the handle of it on the table—an accomplishment which he acquired with fearful alacrity.

"On beyarf I would say of the ladies" (Mr. Atwell bowed to Mrs. Kerridge and his wife) "and the gentlemen" (he bowed to 'Arry who thumped again and said "'Ear, 'ear,' shrilly) "to propose the 'ealth of one who is and 'as always been the pride of her friends, as I 'ope she will be of the profession in which she has this night made so fe-fe-fecilious — I should say felicious —"

"No, felicitous," said Mrs. Atwell, jogging his elbow.

"Eh? — so fe-fe-felicitous a beginning. May she go on from success to success, from triumph to triumph. Ladies and gentlemen, health and 'appiness to Miss Tandem."

"'Ear, 'ear," said Mrs. Kerridge and Mrs. Atwell. "'Ear, 'ear," cried 'Arry, and made the plates rattle. Glasses were raised.

"Miss Tandem!" said all together.

Jane's heart was very full, and unexpectedly she burst into tears. She was so happy, she said. 'Arry was made to return thanks for her. Mrs. Atwell caught him on her knee. 'Arry wriggled to be free.

"Oh," said Mrs. Atwell, "'Arry 'll never have it said as he would n't oblige a lady. Come, come, you ain't shy, you know. Auntie 's often 'eard you recite 'The Fireman's Child.' She knows you ain't shy. 'Ere, I 'll whisper to you what you 've got to say, see? 'Mr. Chairman,' say, 'and ladies,' that 's right, now bow to aunt (you can't bow to me, see, because you 're sittin' on my lap). 'Mr. Chairman and ladies,

I beg to return thanks in the name of Miss Tandem, coupled with another toast —' "

"That's not the way," roared Mr. Atwell, whose laughter could be boisterous on occasion.

"Let us alone, Jow. You mind y'r own, see? 'Arry's getting on very nice. 'Coupled with another toast: Mrs. Kerridge and the ladies!' "

Jane laughed through her tears. Mrs. Kerridge's laughter was pitched in a high key.

"Auntie for a speech," cried Mrs. Atwell.

"Auntie for a speech," echoed 'Arry.

But Mrs. Kerridge only said, "Oh dear! oh dear!" and held her sides.

Long after the Atwells had gone home, and Mrs. Kerridge had unfolded the chair-bed in the room where hung still the fumes of the recent meal, Jane sat at her window at the top of the house, looking out at as much of London as she could see. This was not as inconsiderable a portion as might have been expected in a neighbourhood so thickly populated, for behind Little Petwell Street (Jane's room was at the back of the house) lay a broad strip of untidy ground, the property, I believe, of a minor, and awaiting his majority to be turned to account. No building, then, nearer than the warehouses that flanked the waterside, interposed to obstruct her view, and through gaps Jane could see the river itself.

The night was clear and generously light. Shining surfaces, the water, a slated roof, the metal on the spire of a church, were touched with silver.

Jane thought of her mother and wondered where she was. Was Heaven in one of those stars that were twinkling up there over London? Did she know that Jenny Tandem, who had had a "success" to-night at the Camberwell Palace of Varieties, was her daughter — the Jane she had loved so well and for whom she had worked so hard? Instances of her mother's self-denial recurred to her — the days when she had gone ailing to her work, many a long tramp to save an omnibus fare, many an hour taken out of the hours of rest to work at home with Jane. . . .

"Oh, mother," Jane said under her breath, and looked up at one star of special brightness, "I don't think I ever knew."

The star glistened as if in response.

But it was a night for rejoicing. That was why Jane cried in the first instance. Since her mother was taken from her, she had not thought ever to be so happy. The future seemed assured. If only her mother could know, and share this happiness with her. If what had happened to-night (she built, you see, upon the slender foundations of such success as was represented by the applause of a little Surrey-side house and a resultant five-weeks' engagement at twenty-five shillings a week!) had happened sooner, how greatly she might have lessened her mother's burden! When things were at their best she had never earned more than ten shillings in any single week by her needlework, and here were twenty-five for six days of twelve minutes or so apiece. To be

sure she would have to work. Mr. Paton said her dance wanted a great deal of time spent on it—even the one little dance she had "learnt." Out of her salary she would have to pay for her lessons and always put by something for the purchase of new songs. That did not leave much upon which to keep and clothe herself. But she would "manage," and the great, great thing was that she had made a start.

Jane went to bed at length, but for nearly an hour her excitement kept sleep from her eyes. She saw continually the footlights and the faces beyond. She saw, too, the smoke of the many pipes and cheap cigars. The music of her own song rang in her ears. The "drum part" in the symphony (Jane did not call it symphony!) was very nice. It was the drum that somehow nerved her to run on after the chairman had made his announcement and the symphony had been played twice. Singing mentally (and, did she know it, giving God thanks in a manner) Jane fell asleep.

"On the deep blue sea
He is thinking of me,
And the day when we'll meet in the lane."

The words and the throbbing waltz tune ran even through her dreams.

CHAPTER III

NIGHTLY now at a certain hour Jane went to Camberwell. She looked forward to her "turn" all day long, and experienced a nervous shrinking from the ordeal at the moment immediately preceding her appearance. At this moment, for the first week at least, her trepidation was scarcely less complete than at her initial performance, but the drum in the orchestra never failed to encourage her, and once she was singing the refrain of her song, and the audience showed a disposition to join in, her fears left her. Then it was that there began for her the exquisite exhilaration that gradually possessed her as voice encouraged by voice took up the words.

She led the swinging chorus, grudging the passing of each verse as it brought her nearer to the end of her short reign. For a few minutes Jane felt like one in the heart of life, and once for a strange space the dingy little hall was transformed for her into a garden of languorous flowers whose heads swayed and rocked. She was the breeze that made them sway and rock in unison. Here a flower — in a "billycock" — lent accent to his swaying by marking time with a pipe taken from between the lips; there the nodding feathers on the hat of a factory flower caught Jane's eye and seemed to point the swaying of all the flowers that swayed. That was a delicious moment of

exultation. The charm of it Jane never forgot. Perhaps for that instant Jane of the mediocre talent had a veritable inkling of the spell and the power of art.

She was very happy. Every night, her turn finished, left her impatient for the next. She was living in a dream. The drum in the orchestra had a part in it. Presently, the man who played the drum. She became conscious that his eyes were never off her face when she was on the stage, and she liked the eyes of the man who played the drum. It was some days before she knew that she had remarked them at all; then one night as she sang, having often met them before, she met them and faltered.

Her fellow-artists made friends with her. Nelly Chingford, a "serio," confided to her the whole and intimate story of her life. It was not an unchequered life. Jane wondered how to reconcile the apparent goodness of heart of the narrator with certain incidents in the narrative.

"You'll see life at the halls," Miss Chingford said. "I've been in the profession a good many years and I've seen some. I daresay you would n't think I was twenty-eight?"

Jane had taken Miss Chingford for considerably more and said "No," with truth.

"And yet I've had my troubles too. But I've been wonderfully lucky in getting engagements. The public won't do without me. I've got cheek, you see, and that's what they like. It's cheek you want, dear, if you don't mind me saying so."

"Mr. Paton said that, too," said Jane humbly.

"Ah, he knows," said Miss Chingford, "though he's not up to much — not as an agent. Swindon and Vans are my people. They've got all the best stars. Yes, it seems a pity you haven't got a bit more cheek, for your legs seem wasted on you, don't they? Good legs, and I call yours a very pretty pair, ain't a bit of use unless you've got cheek. They're like soda without the spirit. That first song of yours, that's your sort. You stick to that."

"I like it best," said Jane.

"You will till you know men better. They'll all tell you the same thing — you're the only girl and all that. Well, I believe they think so too at the time. But there's 'the deep blue sea' that you sing about, and we can't cross it to find out what's on the other side, eh? We hug to ourselves the thought of 'the day when we'll meet in the lane,' and perhaps there's lanes on the other side, too, and women as silly as we are, hugging the same thought there. And if there isn't to-day there will be to-morrow, and there'll come a time when we shall know, see? Then — oh, I've been there — the thought turns into a knife or a flame and we hug it still, though it stabs or burns us."

Jane looked at the speaker with surprise. She had not suspected the existence of much heart in the singer of "Another young lady and me."

Sensitiveness with the rendering (and Miss Chingford's rendering!) of "Billingsgate Bessie, the girl

who knew Words" seemed incompatible. Tenderness with the presence in her repertory of "Since I've lived in London"! But Jane had yet to learn many things.

Thenceforward she regarded the buxom, sturdy woman with some wonder, and experienced a momentary sorrow when Miss Chingford convulsed the house with — what she stopped short of saying in her patter. A love for her sprang up in Jane's warm heart. She talked to Mrs. Kerridge of her by the hour; of Lilla, too, of the "'Azardous wire act"; of the Famous Merino Family; of Mr. Isaacs, the manager; of the stage-door keeper who always said "Good-evening, miss"; but she never spoke of the drum.

Mrs. Kerridge in the absence of any one upon whose consideration the welfare of Jane had a closer claim, constituted herself the girl's adviser and guardian. The cousins (at "'Ighb'ry"), who had attended Mrs. Smith's funeral, had troubled themselves no further about their relation. They were maiden ladies who kept a small shop of what Jane (trying to describe after a solitary visit thereto) called religious stationery. Its orderly window proclaimed it a Dépôt of the Tract Society. Illuminated texts, Bibles, prayer-books, church services, hymn-books, books of sermons and devotion, and books "suitable for prizes" were amongst its wares. Its proprietors had never been proud of the connection of their kinswoman, Jane's mother, indirect though it was, with the stage, and Jane knew they would not regard her own adop-

tion of music-hall singing as a profession with any sympathy or approval. She troubled not Highbury, then, nor Highbury her. Mrs. Kerridge, therefore, in her capacity of counsellor felt that it devolved upon her to issue to the little singer certain warnings.

She would have Jane beware of young — yes, and elderly, perhaps indeed especially elderly — gentlemen. As for Lords — well! Let her not believe a word they said (Jane was reminded of Miss Chingford). They hung, Mrs. Kerridge had read or been told, about stage-doors, and their object was to "betray" poor girls.

But Jane was not much bothered by Lords. She thought it must be West End halls that they haunted, and said so.

"Ah, I daresay," said Mrs. Kerridge.

She was washing clothes, and she wrung her hands free of soap-suds and wiped them on her apron. She filled the kettle and put it on the fire and then went back to her tub. Jane leant against the table watching her with an absent expression. She had offered to help, but there was not much to do.

"West End halls," repeated Mrs. Kerridge. "Very likely. Still," she added presently, "it is but right to put y' on y'r guard."

The room was hung across with lines. In an hour's time it would be hot with the steam of drying linen. But if her home was in a dingy South London street, her best friend her landlady who washed at home, her smart relations religious stationers, and her name

Jane Smith; if moreover she was quite unassailed by Lords or other would-be lovers, had she not the exquisite knowledge that she was Jenny Tandem (in print upon a programme) and that for a few minutes every night she had the swaying of a house?

She kissed Mrs. Kerridge suddenly, diving under the clothes-lines to get to her.

"Bless the child, why!"

"I don't know; every one is so good to me and I am so happy."

So spoke Jane in these early days of delicious excitement. In retrospect Jane dated the beginning of her life's story from the evening of the day on which she had watched Mrs. Kerridge at her washing. That night she had her first adventure. It came about in this wise:—

The eldest of the Merino Family was a young man of singular beauty. He was known as Curley, and, in a community that did not ask for more than superficial attractions, he was a favourite generally. Agility strengthened by inventiveness (in which his family shared) caused a good deal to be expected of him. He was supple as a serpent, and, the other two boys of the troupe wearing cotton tights, his lithe and shapely limbs were deemed worthy of silk. He was conscious of being well-favoured, which was perhaps excusable, but he understood contrast where others did not, and Jane used to feel sorry for his younger brother, Perky, a bony lad (albeit of con-

siderable talent, and notable for a certain writhing quality in his contortions, for his somersaults, and particularly for an arrested somersault embodying a curious backward leap from feet to hands and from hands to feet), when Curley in his insolent bravery of form and face stood beside him.

Jane thought once that Curley bullied Perky, but it was difficult to reconcile aught that was not charming with Curley's appearance, and you could n't help liking anything so beguiling.

Now Curley had taken to paying Jane attentions that she did not suspect of being attentions at all. She mistook them for sweets. Chocolate was the delicacy he offered her. Jane, child enough to like it, accepted it without misgiving. Mrs. Kerridge had duly warned her to beware of taking presents from gentlemen, on which account Jane had timidly refused the flower Mr. C. H. Bertram ("Girls of the Chorus" his great song, and a very fine gentleman indeed) took from his coat to present to her. But if Curley was nearly twenty, he looked about sixteen. Jane knew what "gentleman" meant in its relative connection as well as Mrs. Kerridge herself. Mr. Isaacs the manager came under the head of it; so did the shopboys in the stalls who sang her chorus for her and shouted "Brayvo, Jenny!" So did any one who wanted to stand you drinks at the bar. But Curley — well, it never occurred to her.

That night he said he would walk part of the way home with her. He had changed from his perform-

ing dress to a suit of serge that he habitually wore. His eyes were shining.

The boy and the girl left the music-hall together. He said he was hungry and suggested some supper, but Jane demurred. She wanted to get home, she said.

"Oh, you might," he urged, "when I ask you. It's exhausting work doing my show, I tell you. Come, it won't take five minutes, and I know a short cut that'll make up for the time."

Jane suffered herself to be persuaded. They entered a restaurant, and Curley ordered a modest but sufficiently substantial repast. He called for beer. Jane, perceiving that he was ordering for her as well, said hurriedly that she would drink water.

"Better have beer," he said.

Jane shook her head.

"A drop of stout?"

"Please, I'd rather have water."

"I won't let you."

"Lemonade, then."

He accepted the compromise.

Curley's face flushed presently and he looked handsomer than ever. Jane kept meeting his sparkling, laughing eyes, and sometimes, without knowing why, she felt impelled to look away quickly.

"It's our last night at Camberwell," he said.

Jane knew that.

"Are you sorry we're going?"

"Yes. But you've got two halls after to-night,

have n't you? I forget which Madame Merino said they were."

"Rawlinses and the Mocha. After that I hope we shall get West. I ought to have been West a year ago. I shall be heard of some day; I mean to be."

Jane crumbled her bread.

"You have n't said you 're sorry," he said.

"Yes, I have."

"Not properly."

"Well, I am. Please, I must be getting home. It's late."

"All right."

Jane wanted to pay her share, and produced a timid purse.

He laughed.

"Oh, no," he said. "This is my go, see. Sure you won't have anything else?"

He paid and they left the eating-house.

"You 'll be home in no time. No, not that way. I said I knew a quicker. Take my arm."

But Jane preferred to walk without his support.

"All right," he said again, and laughed pleasantly.

They crossed the road, and, taking a side street at his guiding, came to a narrow passage between wooden hoardings. On each side were buildings in course of erection. They had walked a few yards in silence, their footsteps echoing in the channel, when Curley said, —

"Oh, yes, you 'll take my arm."

"No," said Jane. "What for?"

"Yes, you will — or I'll take yours, that'll be better."

He pressed it as he spoke. At his touch Jane started and drew back. She did not know why such a feeling of potential alarm came over her. She was not frightened yet, but she knew she was going to be frightened.

"There's not room to walk like that," she said, trying to make her voice sound steady.

"Why, there's more room."

"No, look, you're taking all the path."

She brushed against the planks of the hoarding. Then she stood still and looked at him.

"I don't like this way," she said; "I'll go back and go the other. Let me pass, please."

He blocked her way.

"You must say good-bye to me, then. I shan't see you again perhaps for a long time. You said I might walk home with you. I'm not going to let you do me out of my walk for nothing."

"I'd rather go alone. Oh, please let me go. It's getting late and — and Mrs. Kerridge will be in a state, and let me pass, please."

"When you've said good-bye."

"Good-bye. Now, please."

"Not like that."

Jane looked up the passage and gauged her chance of escaping him by running. He guessed her intention.

"It'd be no use. I'm as quick as they make 'em. Don't be a little silly. What are you afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid," said Jane. "I don't like this passage, that's all. Let's go the other way. You can walk with me then if you want to."

"I'll walk with you this way."

"You shan't. I won't."

"What are you afraid of?" he said again. "Not of me, just because I like you so well? Oh, I like you, I like you. You're ten times prettier than any one I've ever liked before."

He hinted to her of successes he had had in affairs of the heart and affairs that were not of the heart. She looked at him again and saw the dangerous attraction of his comeliness, and knew that he was not telling her lies. That made him terrible. She looked about her again. A few yards further the hoarding at one side broke for an interval of six feet or so, a bar being across the gap, and there seemed to be an open space behind it. There would probably be an exit to the street at the further side of this.

"You're not going to run," Curley said.

He caught her hand and held it. She knew that if she lost her wits the next few moments would go hard with her. His hand on her turned her hot and cold. She wrenched herself free of it, but he caught her coat, and feeling herself a prisoner she straightway lost the self-control that might have protected her.

A frenzy possessed Jane of the timid mien and the gentle temperament. She got her hands free, and with them held his face away from hers. He was

laughing still. She was distorting his features by the pressure of her palms and fingers against his cheeks, so that his lips were stretched to a leer and his eyes were made long like the eyes of a Chinaman. Even so she could not make him look ugly.

With a sudden ducking of his supple body he released himself from her and caught her by the waist. Jane, straining her muscles, threw him against the wood behind him. He pulled her with him, and then righted himself like a vessel.

"What 's the good of fighting with me?" he said quietly; "and what do you think you 're fighting for?"

"Let me go."

"When I 've kissed you."

"You shan't kiss me."

"Do you think I could n't this moment?"

A word or two of reasoning here and Jane might have found herself free, but, instead, she began to struggle afresh. She lashed her fury, which might have spent itself in physical weakness, into life anew. The cries which, from pride, she had restrained hitherto, broke from her. Then it was that for the first time something that was brutal leapt into Curley's eyes. He exerted his strength and took the kiss he demanded, and another, and another, holding her powerless and close against him. His mouth seemed to sear hers. Then he vaulted lightly over the bar and disappeared.

CHAPTER IV

THEN Jane burst into tears. She sobbed convulsively, her breast heaving and her shoulders with it. She could not recover herself at once, and she turned partly round, and with her forehead against the hoarding cried like a child. One hand hung by her side, the other covered her eyes. She did not hear footsteps coming towards her, nor realize the approach of any one till she heard herself addressed.

"Hullo! What's up?"

Jane started and drew closer to the hoarding.

"What's the matter?"

Jane shook her head, but did not answer.

The speaker, a young man, looked at her for a moment and began to move on. He looked back. Perhaps her black dress had its part in deciding him not to take a rebuff, perhaps something that was pathetic in her attitude, or even in the hand that hung at her side.

"You're in some trouble," he said gently. "I'm a stranger to you, I know, but if I could do anything . . . "

He came near and picked up her hat and began to dust it.

"Why . . . it's Miss Tandem!" he said.

Jane looked round and saw the man who played the drum.

They stood facing each other for a second or two in silence. Tears were standing in Jane's eyes. Her breathing was still interrupted by convulsive indrawings which caused her bosom to rise and fall spasmodically. She would not trust her voice.

She took her hat from his hand and tried to see to bend it into shape, but the tears that were swelling before her pupils distorted her vision. She fumbled for her pocket and in the tumult of her nerves could not find it, and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. He pulled a handkerchief from his own pocket and gave it to her.

"It's all right," she said incoherently, "I — I've got one, only I can't find it. I'm stupid."

She took his handkerchief, however, as she spoke, and dried the tears from her face.

There was dust on her black skirt, and he knelt and began to brush it off gently.

"I . . . I'm — Thank you, there's your handkerchief. I must look a sight. Thank you, it doesn't matter. It'll all brush off at home. Why, my hair's comin' down."

She put her hands to her head to gauge its disorder. Her eyes filled with tears again, and she made another effort to find her pocket and succeeded. She turned to the hoarding again and began to sob.

"Oh," said the drum, "don't cry. What is it, Miss Tandem? Can I do anything? I can't bear to see you cry."

"I'm a silly," Jane said, and her poor stupid little

phrases did n't seem vulgar or commonplace to the drum. "I ought to be ashamed. I shall — be all right in a minute. I 've had a fright. I can't tell you . . . You 're one of the gentlemen in the orchestra, are n't you?"

"Don't cry, Miss Tandem. It 'll all come right, whatever it was. Won't you put your hat on? You 'll catch cold with your head uncovered all this time."

He took her hat from her as he spoke, and with no clumsy touch bent the brim back to its normal form and smoothed out the black bows.

"It 's very good of you," Jane said.

She dried her eyes once more, and with a few deft movements of her fingers arranged her hair securely. She put on her hat.

He saw that her coat was torn a little at the sleeve. There was a moment of indecision.

"I 'll go now," Jane said. She was wondering what he thought. Some explanation was due, not so much to him as to herself, but she could not speak of Curley.

She was very pale.

"You don't look well, Miss Tandem. I 'd like to ask you if I might go a bit of the way with you, but I don't know how you 'd take it."

He saw something on the ground at his feet.

"If you are going in the same direction."

"It would n't matter about that."

He stooped and picked up a scarf.

"Is this yours?" he said, and saw that it was not. It was a square of red silk that Curley used to wrap round his throat after his performance.

"It's not mine," Jane said.

He was looking at the corners for a name or an initial. The scarf was a gift to the young acrobat from one of the girls he had liked, and his name was elaborately embroidered upon it.

"I'd better take it, I think," Jane said. A colour had risen to her face. "I know whose it is. I can send it . . ."

She broke off in embarrassment.

He folded it up, and without looking at her gave it to her. She turned her face from him in fresh distress. The hoardings seemed to take a sinister personality. They had been witnesses to her humiliation. Something that seemed grim and unpitying in the blank front they presented to her threw her back upon herself. She hated them exceedingly.

"Oh," she said, "let us go."

She shuddered.

"Yes," he said, "let us go."

They began to walk side by side down the passage. They emerged into a small street, thence into a wide thoroughfare. The drum talked meanwhile, and Jane was silent. He had a nice tact, and Jane, who would probably have said, "What's that?" if you had spoken of tact to her, was very grateful to him. He talked of the Camberwell Palace of Varieties and of the "profession" generally. When he

spoke of Jane's own song and praised it, the little singer found her tongue.

"Oh, do you think it's good?" she said eagerly. "You don't know how frightened I was at first. I do want to get on. I can't sing my second song a bit, I know, but I like the other one, and everybody's been very kind to me. I've been so happy till to-night, and now . . ."

"Now?"

"I don't know what you must think of me."

He touched the scarf she was carrying.

"Has he been annoying you?"

Jane could not help it: she told the whole story.

"It was dreadful. If you'd only come sooner, or anybody'd come — but I'd rather it had been you. I shall never feel my face the same again."

The drum heard in silence, but his expression had changed as he listened. A sudden recollection of Curley's beauty flashed across Jane, and her heart misgave her.

"Perhaps he didn't mean any harm," she said. "I believe it would have been all right if I hadn't been silly. He's only a boy, is he?"

"He's old enough to be answerable for his actions."

"You won't tell any one. I'm so ashamed."

"You can trust me."

"I know I can."

They looked at each other.

"I think you play the drum beautifully," Jane said then.

He laughed — looking first to see if she were serious.

"Is n't it very difficult?"

"It 's a knack. There 's not much art in it. I teach the violin in the daytime. The drum is only temporary. I 'm waiting for a vacancy in the fiddles. One of the men is going this month and I am to have his place. I want to get on, too."

He paused.

"Lately I 've wanted to get on more than ever."

"Why lately?"

"Something that has come into my life has made me want to. One must have something to work for in this world."

"What are you working for now?"

"A dream, perhaps."

Jane did not understand. She looked doubtful for a moment, but did not question him further. It seemed quite natural that presently she should be talking to him of her mother.

"She has n't been dead six months," Jane said. "That 's who I am in mourning for. The mourning does n't mean much, though, does it? It 's what you feel inside, and there is n't an hour of the day that I don't think of mother. Oh, you don't know how good she was."

"She must have been very happy."

"Why?" asked Jane.

But he knew that her ingenuousness was native.

"To have had your affection, I meant."

There was silence for a few moments. The noise of the traffic seemed to assert itself suddenly. Costermongers were shouting the remnant of their wares. There were a great many butchers' shops, and the meat was very red.

"It makes me frightened," Jane said, "to think of the killing. It is killing, and killing, and killing."

She shuddered and looked away from the shop that had caught her eye.

"Do you know that?" he said quickly, and seemed to mean, "You, too?" also, he spoke as if he thought painful knowledge should have been kept from her.

"I try to forget, just as I shall try to forget what has happened to-night."

"Can you forget things?"

"I can put them away from me. I don't really forget them."

"If I could have prevented what happened to-night!"

"Oh, it does n't matter. I was n't hurt, I was only frightened, and — and ashamed. Would you mind telling me what your name is. Mine 's Jane Smith really, but Mr. Paton said that would n't do. He 's my agent, you know. He thought of Tandem for me, and I think it 's a nice name, don't you?"

"I thought it was n't your real name."

"Don't you like it?"

"Yes, but —"

"But what?"

"I think I like your own name best."

"Jane Smith?"

Jane's face fell. She was disappointed and did not know why.

"It's simple, that's why I like it. Tandem seems to go with your second song — the one you said you didn't care for."

Jane related the circumstances of the adopting of the name.

"I thought it was a nice name," she said when she had done. "It was so difficult to find one."

She took a few steps in silence, waiting for some comment upon his part.

"You haven't told me yours," she said when he did not speak. He was watching her and absorbed in his own thoughts, which were of her and Curley Merino.

"Michael Seaward."

"That's a nice name," said Jane, and then she blushed as she remembered that to say this was to be very personal.

"I must say good-night now," she said rather hurriedly. "I get a tram here at the corner. Good-night, Mr. Seaward, and thank you very much for taking care of me."

"Let me wait till it comes. Have you far to go?"

"Not very. Little Petwell Street. The tram puts me down quite near. Ain't I keeping you? Which direction do you live?"

"New Cross."

"Oh, you've come out of your way!"

The light of a lamp shone on the young man's face. What a clear skin he had. He was clean-shaven and his features were very regular. He was not a bit like any of the rest of the orchestra. His linen was faultlessly clean, and he did not wear spectacles, nor his hair on the collar of his coat. She had thought from the stage that his eyes were brown, but she saw now that they were blue. His expression was grave when he was not smiling — gloomy even a little, but his smile changed all that. He was smiling now.

The same lamp shone on the face of Jane. Her eyes kindled at his, but her smile was made pathetic by the wanness that told of her recent tears. He was reminded of a white rose, and of something brittle and fragile, and, inconsequently, of Gounod's "Ave Maria" also, with the trembling long-drawn notes (he had been playing it that day in his room at New Cross), and as he thought of Curley Merino he set his teeth.

CHAPTER V

JANE saw his expression change and wondered vaguely why. Her tram-car came along just then, and he hailed the driver for her and saw her take her place inside. Jane said, "I shall see you to-morrow," and gave him her hand at parting, and managed to add, "and oh, I do hope you'll get the vacancy," before she stepped into the conveyance. It was empty, and she sat by the door and waved her hand to him twice before she was carried out of sight of him. And even after that she continued for some moments to lean forward and look in the direction whence she was travelling. She was excited and restless and not unhappy. What had happened since the incident that had so unnerved and distressed her seemed to throw it out of the prominence it had threatened to assume in the unwritten diary of her mind. It didn't make much difference, did it? The Merino Family had finished their engagement at the Camberwell Palace. She was not likely to come across them again just yet. Curley Merino would not dare a second time. (The drum — she always thought of him as the drum — was somehow connected with this thought.) The advertisements in the car caught her eye, and she read some of them. At a certain angle her head ached. Had it been aching all along? Her knees felt weak, too. The advertisements danced

about on the ceiling and the panels. The conductor was looking at her. He was asking her if she was not ill. He had a kind face. The drum — Michael Seaward — had a kind face, too. She was glad he was her friend. She had made a friend of him. Once she had met his eyes and faltered as she sang. . . . She had forgotten that all the time she was talking to him. Oh, cruel Curley Merino! She could see his face distorted by her hands. It was like one of the Chinese masks (only the mask was ugly and he could never be ugly) in the shop where she got her make-up. What a lot of rouge Nelly Chingford used. She was kind, too. . . . No, she was all right. . . . The conductor was fanning her face with a halfpenny paper.

Jane sat up and rubbed her eyes.

"You're better now," the conductor said. "You was nearly off, and it ain't a hot night either. You're not very strong, are you, miss?"

"I've never been faint before," said Jane. "I don't know what it was."

"You was nearly tumblin' forward. You'd 'a' been down on to the floor, I believe, if I had n't 'a' caught y'."

"I did n't know," said Jane. She still felt bewildered. "I thought I was thinking."

But she could not explain her sensations nor remember them accurately. Curley Merino was connected with them, she knew, and Michael Seaward.

"I have n't passed Dawson Street, have I?" she asked suddenly.

"No, miss. You sit still there. Dawson Street you want. I'll tell you when we get there."

Jane closed her eyes. A sense of security stole over her. She put away, as she had said that she could, all thought of the thing she wished to forget and let her mind dwell upon her new friend. She wondered about his life. It had been lonely she had gathered. That would account for the graveness (Jane was romantic and called it sadness) of his expression when he was not smiling. She hoped he would get on, and wondered what he had meant when he said that lately his wish to get on had strengthened. . . .

"Dawson Street, miss," and a touch on her arm. She opened her eyes and rose to her feet. He helped her tenderly to alight and asked her if she felt well enough to walk. Not till she was half down the street and the tram beyond hail did she remember that he had never asked for her fare.

Mrs. Kerridge's window was dark when Jane reached home. She opened the door with her key and ascended the stairs as noiselessly as she could, glad not to have to account for her appearance. She undressed quickly and got into bed. Her whole wish now was to put a night between herself and her unpleasant experience, and by the same period to bring nearer her meeting across the footlights with her new friend. Who could tell, perhaps he might even walk part of the way back with her as he had done tonight! She mentioned the drum in her prayers side by side with her mother, who, though she was dead,

had never dropped out of them, and Mrs. Kerridge, who had been dropped in from gratitude for many kindnesses. Then she went to sleep.

She woke in the morning with the sensation of something having befallen her. It had followed her through her slumbers, taking more or less definite form. A few moments elapsed, however, before she could collect her thoughts and remember exactly what had taken place. Her headache, such as it had been, was quite gone, and a night's rest had restored her to the vigour she owed to her youth.

Mrs. Kerridge, when Jane, her fire burning dilatorily, went down to her to "borrow" some boiling water to make her tea, said, "I did n't 'ear y' come in last night, dear. Was y' very late?"

Jane said she had stopped to hear the end of the performance (as was the case), and had walked part of the way home.

"I did n't take the tram till I got to the Goat and Trinkets. There was a very full house last night, and there were two new turns after mine and I stopped for them. I came in very quietly so as not to wake you."

She could not bring herself to tell Mrs. Kerridge of her adventure, but the semi-deception she seemed to herself to be practising upon her friend caused her to blush a rosy red.

"The fire 'll catch your face, dear. Let me lift the kettle off for you."

Jane said it was all right, and was grateful to the

glowing coals over which she was standing as she filled her little teapot, for the shelter they had afforded her.

"I 'll boil y' an egg, if y' like," said Mrs. Kerridge. "I got five for sixpence last night from Binderses. I took 'em, they looked so large. I 'm going to 'ave one meself. You 'ave one, dear."

But Jane wanted to get back to her room to be alone and to think. She had a bit of ham over from supper and it must be eaten. Thanks all the same to Mrs. Kerridge.

"Or else they 're fine eggs," Mrs. Kerridge said, "and I 'm sure you 're welcome." There was always a tag to any talk with Mrs. Kerridge. She summed up every case before she dismissed it.

Jane hurried back to her room. She was too much excited to eat with any appetite, and the slice of ham remained untouched and served her some hours later for dinner. She ate a few mouthfuls of bread and butter, but drank her tea eagerly. Life seemed to be beginning for her. What had happened had had to happen. She shuddered still at the thought of her struggle with the acrobat, but that was the price at which she had been destined to gain the drum for a friend. You had to pay for everything, and well for you if you paid first instead of last.

She could not stay in that morning. . . .

Wet streets were shining. Rain had fallen and now the sky was blue. She wished for a sight of the river. It ran through a glistening town, she found, when

she was standing on Westminster Bridge twenty minutes later. The air was soft, and told of coming spring. Jane thought of crocuses and the smell of damp earth, and knew what the country would be like on a day like this. It was four years since she had seen brown hedgerows with the sun upon them, and birds fluttering in and out of them with glad chirpings to greet the first promise of a time of leaves and flowers. The spring seemed to be before Jane, too. A buoyancy lifted her spirits and floated them so that they sailed on expectancy as on a flood. She saw the world with larger eyes. Perhaps Curley had not meant to be cruel.

There were seagulls wheeling above the water. Sometimes one or another dipped and skimmed the surface for offal on the incoming tide. Jane watched their untiring wings. The roar of the traffic was behind her. London was a living thing that day. A barge passed under the bridge, her sails red-brown as an autumn leaf and all her paint vivid and flaming. The soft wind blew her smoke this way and that. A little boy was at the helm.

The day passed quickly and slowly by turns. Jane worked at her dances in the afternoon, on the few square feet of space that could be obtained in her little room by pushing the chest of drawers into a corner and piling the table and the two nondescript chairs on the bed. She was taking lessons twice a week from the teacher to whom Mr. Paton had introduced her, but with One, two, three, to a hummed

accompaniment and many interruptions and fresh beginnings consequent on the restriction of the available area, she practised daily to the best of her ability. She went through her songs, too, and longed for a piano at this time. In the life of her father, at a period of evanescent prosperity, the Smiths had possessed one. Some speculation in which Mr. Smith had embarked had turned out satisfactorily, and the acquirement of a piano upon the "hire system" had been one of the first results of having a little spare money. Jane was sent to a decayed governess who imparted, to the daughters of small tradesmen and the like, the rudiments of music for the munificent remuneration of a shilling an hour, and, taking an interest in her studies, Jane made progress, and soon learned to play the cheap airs that satisfied her and her parents' uneducated tastes. A falling off of the monthly payments led, however, at the end of two years to the seizure of the instrument, and circumstances had never since then enabled the Smiths to replace it. So Jane had to rehearse her songs as best she could without accompaniment.

Curley's scarf lay on the mantelpiece where she had put it on the previous evening. It caught her eye as she sang "The Lane" for the second time, and the song ended abruptly on an unfinished note. She approached it, — timidly, one watching her would have said, — and stood looking at it for some moments. She had often seen it round Curley's shapely throat. It brought him instantly before her. Across

her mind like shadows flitting over a wall presentments of him in half a dozen aspects followed one another in quick succession. She saw the beautiful lines of his limbs and body as with a dexterous grace and ease he went through a performance that, seeming to defy the laws of gravity, owed its success to the completeness of its obedience to them. She saw him standing near Perky; saw him at the wings in the blue serge suit; saw him drinking — a long drink — from a pewter pot, his eyes showing above the rim, and twinkling, perhaps, as they carried on the conversation the occupation of his mouth might have interrupted; saw his roving glance — a man's glance; saw a funny little run he gave — a boy's run — after some boyish trick he had played upon some fellow-artist; saw him push his hat back on his head and lean, as was a habit with him, against whatever he happened to be near; saw him laugh and heard the sound (you always wanted to laugh with Curley!); saw Curley, in short, in all that expressed or appeared to express him. He reminded her of statues she had seen, and pictures (outline woodcuts) in books in second-hand shops, but, most of all, of days when the sun shone brightly. He had been suggested, and elementary Jane, to her credit, had felt it dimly, in the blueness of the sky that morning; in the gleam of the flowing river; in the rapidness of the river's flowing; in the sound of it (could she have heard it) where it swirled round the piles of the bridge; in the colours of roof and road, and even busy traffic; in

the soft airs that spoke of the coming spring. The gulls coming up from the sea on strong wings were not freer in their movements than Curley. He was an embodiment of glowing, pulsing, singing youth and life. Jane did not know what Pagan meant, but she knew now the limits Curley had set to his aspirations. He seemed complete. He lacked everything . . . and did he lack? . . . and did it matter to lack? Jane felt confused. The scarf (she had not withdrawn her eyes from it, and a faint scent of smoke that clung to it was in her nostrils) seemed to exercise some power over her. The scarlet of it burned her eyes. She must hate Curley; it was her duty, — more, the glimpse he had given her of his true nature had made it her privilege. Did she hate him? — did she hate him as much as she had hated him the previous night? — that morning even? Had she hated him at all, even when he frightened her? She had liked him before. Why try to hate him for liking her? He said he liked her better than other girls he had liked . . . that was a horrid word. There were different sorts of liking. Jane felt frightened again — the same sense of potential fear oppressed her as at the moment that had called this fear to life. She thought of Michael Seaward, knowing that he would have the power to calm her; but, for a strange space, brief, it was probable but unmeasured, she could not recall his appearance. She could only see Curley. He thrust his laughing, irresponsible face between her and the shadowy face beyond. He seemed to baffle her. She

thought he laughed at the knowledge that he could so harass her. She remembered a rose he had been wearing in his coat, and how in the struggle with her the petals had fallen till but one or two remained. The stripped and stricken look of the thing that had been a flower was present to her. She had not known that she had observed it at all.

The strange moment passed, and Jane recalled the face of Michael

CHAPTER VI

BUT in the flesh she did not see him that night. His place in the orchestra was empty. Some one else played his instrument intermittently (combining it with what Jane called a trumpet) and a deprecating enquiry or two delivered with what air of indifference she could assume did not elicit any explanation of his absence.

"Gracious, child, I don't know," Nelly Chingford said. "I'm sure I can't tell one from another. They play too loud, some of them, that's all I notice about them. I had one of my best songs queered that way at the North London one night. I could n't hear me own voice, and I flatter myself I take a bit of drowning."

Jane was learning that in "the profession" all topics led to one. It was an abstruse subject that could not be made to demand or at least justify some personal allusion or application or anecdote. Up to the moment of appearing on the stage Jane hoped that she would see Michael Seaward take his place, but her turn came and he was not there. She did not sing quite as well as usual that night or it may be that the audience was colder. She missed the support of the drum, and felt sure that if her friend had been there to point the chorus in the customary way, the gallery would have joined in with more hearti-

ness. She dreaded her second song and was glad when her time was over. She was relieved afterwards to hear Lilla of the Hazardous Wire Act, who had appeared earlier in the programme, say that she did n't know what was the matter with the house, it was enough to freeze you, and she was generally sure of a round when she did the jugglery business with her handkerchief over her eyes, but had hardly got a hand.

"I hate the public sometimes," she said, "there 's no counting on them. They 're silly fools, too, for, if they only had the sense to see it, it 's the way they take you that makes your show good or bad. I never drop anything if it 's a go, and it was their stupidity made me miss those two knives to-night. Set of ninnies!"

"I don't have to complain of 'em very often," said Miss Chingford, who was fastening her coat. "But they are stupid sometimes. You can't give it a reason."

"It 's atmospheric," said a man who was dressed as a charwoman and was waiting his turn. "What do you say, Miss Tandem?"

Jane, who had n't the least idea what he meant, "expected" that was it.

"Atmospheric, that 's what it is," repeated the female personator suavely. "The whole house gets charged with it and it takes talent to overcome it."

"H'm," said Lilla. "We 'll see what you can do."

"It 's like this," began the charwoman, but the current turn — a sketch — coming to an end, he had to

watch for his entrance, and he left his sentence unfinished. The man and girl, who came off somewhat dejectedly, joined in the discussion. They had come on from the Mocha, where they had met with a very different reception.

Jane, timid always and never very talkative in general conversation (the result of a humility that made her silent upon matters of which she knew but little, and on which she was thus shy of expressing an opinion), pricked up her ears at the mention of the Mocha, and felt that she might hazard a remark. She addressed it to the girl.

"That's where the Merino Family have gone, is n't it? Did you see them there?"

"They'd left before we came. There'd been some row on, too."

"Row?"

"I did n't hear the rights of it, but one of them had a fight with some one, or something."

"A fight?"

Jane grew pale.

"Which of them?"

"Well, I did n't take much notice. I think I heard one of them got run in. Fred might know."

"Oh, ask him," said Jane.

"What was that about one of the Merino Troupe?" said the girl, touching her comrade's arm. "There was a fight, was n't there, or something? They'd been doing a show here till last night and I was telling this young lady —"

The attention of the others was arrested. They looked at Jane first at the mention of her, then at the man who answered to the name of Fred.

"I did n't hear quite what it was, but one of them — what 's that good-looking one's name? Curley? That 's it. He got a bit of a thrashing, I believe, from some one who had a grudge against him and — "

"What, Curley get a thrashing!" said Miss Chingford.

Lilla gave utterance to an elegant "Well, I never!"

Jane, changing colour for any one who had happened to observe her, looked at the man for further information.

"Who gave it him?" Miss Chingford said.

That was what Jane trembled to know, but could not trust herself to ask.

"Some fellow who was waiting for him outside. I did n't hear who it was. It all happened, you see, an hour before me and my partner got there. The Merinos were doing an early turn."

"They 'd another hall," said Lilla.

"Yes, Rawlinses," said Miss Chingford. "Poor little Curley! What had he been up to, I wonder."

"Something he 'd no business, you bet your life."

"He 's a mischievous young monkey."

"He 'll get himself into trouble if he don't watch it."

"Seems as if he had."

"Did you — did you say he was run in?" Jane asked, timidly, addressing "Fred's" partner.

"I think so. Somebody was. Was n't he, Fred?"

"No, it was the other one."

"You don't know who that was?"

"No, I think I heard Curley had to go round to the station, but it was him as charged the other one with an unprovoked assault."

"I wonder what that boy 'd been up to," Nelly Chingford said again. "Some girl he 's been getting into trouble, I expect."

Jane held her breath.

"You could n't blame the girl," Lilla said, and Fred laughed.

"And nobody 'd have the heart to be hard on Curley," said Miss Chingford. "He 's a pretty boy if ever there was one. Curley get a thrashing! It 's a shame."

"Oh, I take his part, too," said Lilla.

"You were doing that," said Fred, "when you said you could n't blame the girl."

Lilla looked at him to see whether he was laughing at her. That she had not been inconsistent was too subtle a point for the artist of the Hazardous Wire to understand.

Nelly Chingford said, "I know who 'll be on Curley's side, right or wrong."

And Lilla said, "Who 's that?" rather quickly.

"Why the Ladies, of course. What do you say, dear? You have n't said much."

She turned to Jane, who blushed at once, and everybody laughed.

"And I would n't say Curley was n't a bit gone in

your direction," Miss Chingford could not resist adding.

"And you could n't blame Curley," said Lilla. She was satisfied that she was not being what she called "got at," and felt she could afford to be generous.

"That you could n't," said Nelly heartily.

"I must be going," said Jane.

The group broke up presently.

Jane went home and could not sleep. Oh, if it was Michael Seaward who had thrashed Curley, and on her account! He had been "run in." Did that mean a night in the cells? Perhaps it was not Michael. Then poor Curley. She did not like to think of Curley as having met with chastisement. You had to forgive Curley his transgressions. You could n't help it. Lilla and Nelly Chingford were right. Was Curley hurt? Perhaps he was disabled. Jane had seen street fights. Such dreadful things happened in them. A man had had his ankle dislocated by a kick outside that public house near Binderses one Saturday. An injury to Curley might ruin his career. But Michael Seaward would not kick. How silly she was, and it might not have been Michael at all! Then where was he to-night? Why was his place in the orchestra empty? She sat up in bed in the darkness and thought of the hours that must pass before she knew. Oh, why had she brought this thing upon herself? It would have been better to let Curley have his kiss and have made no fuss about it. Poor Curley! Why had she told Michael at all? She was a

little fool. If she could go to sleep and forget all about it! But she was wide awake. What a dreadful evening it had been. Oh, Curley and Michael!

Then a new view of the case presented itself to her. Jane had read much penny fiction. She had never had a lover — and now two men were fighting for her. There was comfort in that. There was even some glory in it. It was not for nothing that she had felt herself to be standing on the threshold of adventure.

For a time this idea thrilled her with an excitement that was stimulating; then rain beginning to beat upon the roof and against her window, her spirit sank once more within her. The gorgeous day that had promised spring had gone back of its word, and the winter was still there. Life was as disappointing. What rain! A wind was rising and the drops lashed the panes. They beat upon the slates like whipcords; Jane listened to the sound.

How little Nelly Chingford had known when she "chaffed" her about Curley how her light words told! Jane wondered that her fleeting colour and her trembling had not betrayed her. She had wished to sink into the floor when they all looked at her. But no one had "noticed." Some words of Michael Seaward's now recurred to her. Before she had explained her trouble to him in the presence of the terrible hoardings, he had said it would all come right whatever it was. She liked to think of that assurance now. But where was he to-night?

Jane cried a little and felt better. The splashing of the rain became rhythmical. The beating of it upon the slates was not like the beating of whipcords. It was like the sound of many drums, and to this sound Jane presently fell into slumber.

Her lesson and going to and from it occupied the next morning, which was shortened by the fact that Jane overslept herself and did not wake till the clocks were striking ten. In the afternoon restlessness possessed her, and it occurred to her that she might leave Curley's scarf for him at the Mocha Music Hall, and so have a chance of hearing news of the matter that absorbed her thoughts. She folded the scarf neatly and made it into a parcel which she directed to him, in the childish handwriting that was somehow exactly the handwriting you would have expected from Jane. Then she started on her errand. She walked twice round the music-hall before she could find the stage-door, and then came upon it suddenly. A man was standing on the step, and she could not pluck up courage to address him. She passed him by, and went round to the front once more and read the bills. There were names she had heard of amongst those that figured upon them. "Miss Alfie Le Roy, Serio and Dancer," and "Miss Bessy Pwang, the Charming Burlesque actress and Queen of Song," took her back to her first interview with Mr. Paton. "The Famous Merino Family" in red letters made her heart jump. After all the man at the stage-door could not eat her. She screwed up her courage and went back.

He was looking up the street and whistling. He did not hear her the first time she addressed him.

He looked at the parcel.

"Yes, that's right," he said, when he had read the address.

"Thank you," said Jane.

After all, could she ask? She could not, and began to move away. She must, and came back.

"Was he hurt last night?"

"Hurt? Who? Oh, Mr. Merino. Well, he got a bit of a drubbin' before they was separated. I missed it all myself. I heard the noise, but the police was here before I could get down, and all I heard was him charging the other one with assaulting him."

"Who was the other one?"

Jane's lips grew white.

"Seaweed or Seaward, I think some one said; I don't know him myself. The case came on this mornin'. He was fined, I think, or bound over to keep the peace or something."

Jane went home with lagging steps.

Every one was talking of the affair that night at the Camberwell.

Jane peered into the orchestra with apprehensive eyes.

Michael was not there.

Every one took Curley's part.

"He's a damned smart young fella," Mr. Isaacs said. "I'm glad it didn't happen here. And what that Seaward done it for, goodness knows. He said

he 'd nothing to say. He had the face to come round here this evening, but I told him he 'd be assaulting me next, and he could go and play the drum somewhere else."

Mr. Isaacs laughed loud.

CHAPTER VII

MICHAEL left the music-hall at once on learning that his services were no longer required and walked towards Peckham Road, meaning there to take the tram for New Cross. The passage that had been the scene of Jane's struggle and distress lay on his way. He stopped when he reached the spot where he had come upon her, and, recalling her vividly, did not regret the action that had brought about his dismissal. There was no one to see, or he might have been thought to behave oddly. He examined the hoarding minutely, and, finding a knot in a board and seeming to recognize it, he pressed his lips to the wood a little to one side of it. What he kissed was, as nearly as he could guess it, the place where Jane's head had rested when she cried.

He reached Peckham Road before he remembered that the fine his chastisement of Curley had cost him, together with the loss of his engagement, would so tax his resources that the very strictest economy would be necessary to keep his expenditure within the narrowed limits of his means. He set himself to walk, therefore (no great hardship), and turned towards home.

It was a fine night. The rain to which Jane had listened and fallen asleep had washed London clean. The pavements were dry, with damp at the joinings.

The roads where traffic had not disturbed them had the sandy, stony look and the absence of mud that tells of a recent deluge. Organs were playing tunes he knew. The Camberwell would be full that night (it was Saturday) and Jane would sing and he would not be there to hear. Would she see that he was not there?

The thoroughfares were blatant with the business of the last day of the week. They flared with the gas jets of cheap shops and the dripping lamps on costermonger's barrows. He chose quieter streets till the monotony of row after row of little houses drove him back to where the monotony was of a less insistent kind.

Jane would hear . . . what would she think? Perhaps she would blame him as others blamed him. Mr. Isaacs' attitude represented, it was probable, that of every one else. Jane, only, would know what lay behind his silence. But what good had he done her, after all?

His room looked very desolate when he entered it. He lighted a lamp and mended the fire which was nearly out, but yielded to careful treatment and presently burned up. Then things looked more cheerful. The room thus illumined showed itself to be small but not uncomfortable. It was inexpensively furnished with a very narrow bed (that always made Michael think of a line in a hymn that he had been used as a child to misconstrue into a comparison of the relative size of a bed and a grave), a washstand, a table, a

chair, and a chest of drawers of painted deal. To these things Michael had added a wickerwork armchair of his own, and a few shelves on which were ranged what books he possessed. Two or three unframed prints were on the walls and a couple of photographs upon the mantelpiece. A violin-case and some music lay on the top of the chest of drawers.

Michael looked round dejectedly and wondered what was in store for him. He was sorrier than he admitted at the loss of his engagement. The pay had been small, but, the rest of his income fluctuating, a certain weekly salary was not a thing to hold lightly. Moreover, the vacancy he had been likely to get would have improved his position considerably. He lay back in the wicker chair and fixed his gaze upon the fire. He did not intend his life to be a failure. He had energy and perseverance as gifts, and they stood to him for capital. He knew that, but now a paralysis of will came upon him and despondency crept in unchecked. He felt that whether he succeeded or failed it mattered little.

So, he sat inert, while the fire cracked and pouted and threw out little jets of smoke from bubbles of pitch, and seemed a more living thing than he. He lost himself in gloomy reflections. Let him be thankful, he told himself, that he had no one dependent upon him. He must hold it good that he stood alone. The curse of his life was thus its blessing. He reviewed his childhood, his boyhood, his manhood, and saw them all from the same standpoint. Ill-luck he said

to himself pursued him (knowing full well that it was not wholly true, though it was true in part). He had had to a great extent to shift for himself, for the death of both his parents in his infancy had deprived him of the protection and companionship natural to that period, and the aunt of Birmingham, who then took him under by no means unvoiced protest, had done little to supply their place. That Michael had not suffered permanent injury at her hands spoke to the stuff he was made of. A boy of weaker will — sensitive and emotional as was Michael himself — would, it is probable, have carried into later life something more than a somewhat grave expression of countenance, as a record of the system of repression to the rigour of which he was subjected in these early days. But the little boy, who cried himself to sleep many and many a night, had at times a hopefulness and a belief in better things to come that saved him from despair, even when his prospects seemed darkest. He worked hard at school, determined to equip himself for the struggle he knew life to be, and by the time he was twelve years old, and was earning half a crown a week as an errand boy, he was better educated than many a lad of his age in more exalted stations. Then his aunt died and Michael found himself adrift. He obtained a situation in the family of a rich tradesman as odd hand, cleaning knives and boots, carrying coals and water, and doing whatever was nobody else's business, and much besides. Here he stayed, promoted in course of time to buttons and more de-

finite duties, till he was fifteen, when, the establishment being reduced, he got a like situation in the house of a clergyman, and there it was that his tastes for music were noticed and received encouragement. He was found to possess a very creditable voice and he joined the church choir, where he came in contact with his first friend. This was a Mr. Atherton, organist at the church in question and a man of some perception. He was attracted by the tall earnest lad with the well-cut face and the intelligent manner, and saw in him — or thought he saw — something more promising than was to be found in the average choir-boy who sang for sixpence a Sunday and the yearly treat. He called him up into the loft and asked him a few questions. He was pleased, perhaps, with the substance or the spirit of the boy's answers, for not very long elapsed before he was giving Michael lessons in music for no more substantial reward than the lighting-up of Michael's face, his gratitude, and his devotion. These lessons lasted for a year, and this year was the happiest in Michael's life. Every available minute that he had to himself was spent in studying the books that Mr. Atherton lent him, and many of his afternoons and evenings "out" were spent practising the violin, which his tutor had given him, wherever he could do so undisturbed and undisturbing — in the stable loft, or, if his master was out and there was no one to hear him, in his distant little bedroom. He made steady progress, and his zeal more than repaid the pains expended upon him. At the

end of the year, however, his lessons abruptly ceased. Mr. Atherton fell ill, and after a protracted convalescence was ordered abroad for his health and was obliged to relinquish his post. It surprised even himself to find how great a part his reluctance to leave Michael had in his disinclination to obey his doctor. Then Michael stood once more alone. But his friendship with the organist had done much to develop him. In his loveless life the necessity to love some one had been urgent as hunger, and when Mr. Atherton had said good-bye to him, Michael knew that his sorrow was its own compensation. The possession of a grief even (and Michael grieved sorely after his friend) was not all pain to one who had possessed nothing.

Through various vicissitudes went Michael then. He could not reconcile himself to a life spent in service, though the years passed before he finally decided to leave it. A change of place during this period effectually put a stop to any musical studies. That he might have a part of his evenings free he went into a small shop; thence a year later into a larger, and making friends amongst his fellow-workers he found life a fuller and a pleasanter thing than it had promised to be. But he had lost much time, and his taste had suffered by lack of education. He worked at his music, however, and joined an obscure orchestral society. From this he got an engagement in the orchestra at one of the smaller music-halls in Birmingham. His attainments were too incomplete to permit of his as-

piring higher for a considerable period. Howbeit by the time he was twenty-one he could play two or three instruments sufficiently well, and was giving lessons in the daytime on the violin and the banjo. The juxtaposition of the two was somehow representative of the plane on which he stood.

Another year passed and he was drawn to London. Here ill-luck seemed inclined to force him under for the first six months. He got a short engagement at an Islington hall, and afterwards eked out a somewhat precarious living by giving lessons intermittently and playing at free-and-easys, sing-songs, smoking concerts, and the like. More than once he thought of returning to Birmingham; to the counter; to service even. But of a sudden matters began to mend. He chanced on a music-shop in New Cross where he was able to give lessons by an arrangement with the proprietor — a small room with a piano being put at his disposal in return for a percentage of his profits. He engaged a bedroom close by — that in which he was now brooding with his household gods (the two photographs, the prints, the books, his violin) about him; and the neighbourhood being populous and fairly well to do, pupils found their way to him. When he secured the vacancy, humble though it was, but with its chance of advancement, in the orchestra at the Camberwell, things began to look permanent and cheerful.

Now once more the affairs of his life took the transient air that they had always worn. There had been

no resting-place hitherto, and there was none now. The plaint was old as the world, if Michael had paused to consider it. The secret of continuance was in it too — and hope and incitement to effort were in it also. But he did not see them there just then. He only saw fate pushing him off the ledge towards which he had been climbing, and which he had thought just reached.

The morning found him less despondent. Of what use was it to be young if adverse circumstances were not to be overridden. Even in the darkest days, when his aunt had driven the iron into his soul and the impulses and humours natural to childhood (or his childhood) had been repressed in relentless fashion, he had not lost a self-reliance that had its foundations in the health that was his birthright. He came, he had heard, of a healthy stock (the untimely death of his parents had been due to accident — the capsizing of a boat — not to constitutional causes), and he was not ill-equipped for the struggle to which he had been born.

He rose — a little later than usual it seemed to him, though on looking at his watch he found that it had stopped and so could not be sure, and he waited for his landlady to bring him his breakfast. The sound of footsteps on the stairs and the knock at his door were delayed, surely. They came, however, at length.

He had suffered much at the hands of slovenly and incompetent landladies before he lighted upon his

present lodging. Here, however plain might be his fare, — meagre even upon occasion if his funds were low, — he could count upon clean plates and shining forks and a cup from which he need not hesitate to drink. As the result, perhaps, of his training in service, the discomfort in which the young bachelor of his station in life was expected to live by those who pretended to minister to his wants amazed him, and as he watched the deft young woman laying his cloth and taking the few things he required noiselessly from the tray she rested on her hip, he felt that, luck in or luck out, some luck remained to him.

"You did n't say what you 'd like, Mr. Seaward, so I done you a bloater. We 're having some ourselves. My husband always fancies a bloater Sunday morning."

"Thank you, Mrs. Sands. I forgot it was Sunday, truth to tell."

So had he, and had meant to go round to the music-shop.

Mrs. Sands laughed pleasantly.

"I wish my husband had forgot it too," she said, "and he would n't be still abed. Such a piece of work I have every week to get the children off in time to the Sunday-School. But there, he 's up at six all the week. I can't blame him."

Mrs. Sands looked round.

"Will you have your fire this morning?"

Michael shook his head.

"It 'll do later," he said. "I shall be going out presently."

He sat down to his breakfast. Mrs. Sands withdrew and came back. She held something in her hand. Michael recognized it as the money that he had left as usual upon the table on the preceding evening for his rent.

"I want to say, Mr. Seaward, and Mr. Sands told me to say it, too, that if it's not quite convenient to you this week owing to the extra expense you've been put to" (Mrs. Sands thus delicately alluded to the fine of which she knew, Michael having made no secret of the result of his conduct, though he had kept silence upon the reason of it); "if it'd suit you better for it to stand over, it can, sir, and any time'll do."

She was going to put the money upon the chest of drawers, but Michael would not hear of her leaving it.

"It's very good of you and Mr. Sands — very, very good of you, but it's not necessary. Really."

"Really, sir?"

"Really, Mrs. Sands. It's none the less good of you, and I shan't forget it."

He was touched.

"I shan't forget it," he said again; and was reminded of the gratitude he had never been able fully to express to Mr. Atherton. The world seemed full of kindness.

"Say half, then, Mr. Seaward, and let half stand over. You see, Sands is in full work and earns good money at the yard."

"No, Mrs. Sands, but thank you both heartily."

"Well, if you won't, you won't."

She nodded and smiled and went away.

Michael finished his breakfast.

He put on his coat presently and went out. To-day at least he need not think of the future. Time enough to think what he should do when the work of the week began. He thought he would like to get away from his fellow-men, and wondered where he could go and leave their haunts behind. He thought of Greenwich Park. At this time of year it would not be crowded as when summer weather drew up crowds from Deptford and Blackheath Hill. A few miles of street brought him to the Hospital. Here time seemed to have stood still. The sight of a pensioner sent his thoughts to the sea, and thither they flowed also on the grey river. He had never seen the sea. How strange that was. How bounded must be his range. Ah! one day, one day! Jane was in that cry.

The morning was fresh and clear, but somewhat sombre withal. The sky was cloudy but high, and a stiff wind swept round the hill and tossed the leafless branches of the chestnut trees. Michael went and stood under them presently to listen to the sound. The roar of waves was resembled, he had read, by wind in a forest. Oh, he would read, he would read. What were books for, if not for such as he who could not travel and see for himself? The size of some of the trunks struck him, and he wondered what was their age. Once each of these giants had been a

slender sapling. That was the observatory, that building to his left, and that the clock that timed England. He walked up to it and set his watch. He saw others do the same.

The long avenues and the broad paths seemed generously spacious after the streets through which he had passed. He drew the air deeply into his lungs and felt invigorated. Between the trees, the distances were elusively blue. He walked to the gates and looked out across Blackheath. He stood still for some moments, and then turned back, and took another direction, pausing now and then to look at the view, or the deer, or children playing on the slopes or amongst the trees. Lovers sauntered, arm in arm, along the more secluded walks. A few, despite the wind, were sitting on the seats. The scarlet ribbon on a girl's hat was like a spot of fire against the brown of one of the tree-trunks, and the yellow braid on a horse-artilleryman made his trim figure conspicuous.

Michael paused longest at a point whence the ground fell away from him in a steep decline, and looked this way and that across the valley. The clouds broke at this moment, and the sun shone out and gilded tree and sward, roof and river. The day was transfigured. Colours revealed themselves where before there had been but murkiness. A bit of glass became a diamond. Lights and shadows flecked the slopes. The charm of the old park seized Michael's imagination and possessed it. He saw with wider vision. The paths winding round the hills and

through the groves belonged to the picture life of past centuries. There lovers had walked as lovers were walking now. The record of their vows was written, for those who could read it, in the very air. . . .

Jane's face rose up before him. He saw her as he had seen her many times, and he saw her as he had seen her once. Her voice rang in his ears; and little movements that she made as she sang were reproduced for him in recollection.

Michael left Greenwich with regret. He felt like one who has had a holiday and is returning to work, but he felt also the benefit which such a one should feel. He walked briskly, and in time reached home.

Mrs. Sands met him on the stairs.

"There 's been a young lady asking for you," she said.

"For me!"

Mrs. Sands nodded and smiled.

"I did n't expect any one. Who was it?"

"She did n't give any name. She seemed to want to see you very much, and she asked if I knew when you 'd be in."

"Did she leave no message?"

"No. She said she would write, that was all."

Michael supposed it must have been one of his pupils, and went up to his room. Thither Mrs. Sands followed him presently with his dinner. His thoughts ran on what she had told him. He could think of nothing that would bring a pupil to see him on Sunday.

He asked for some description of his visitor.

Of medium height, Mrs. Sands would have called her, and plainly dressed. Mrs. Sands had not noticed the colour of her hair or her eyes. A wild conjecture had prompted Michael to ask. He abandoned it at once: returned to it a moment later when Mrs. Sands said slight and delicate-looking and with a pretty colour.

When she further spoke of a timid manner, Michael ceased to question, and his heart beat faster.

CHAPTER VIII

JANE left the music-hall at once after she had done her turn on that Saturday night. The house was full and she had been applauded loudly, but her heart was very heavy. She took her joys and sorrows seriously, and she felt just then as if she could never be happy again. To have been the means of bringing about the dismissal of her friend was a pain that she could hardly keep to herself. She cried as she hurried along the streets. If she could but tell him how sorry she was! He might not even know that she had learnt what he had done for her sake. When this became a thought that she could not endure, she stood still in her pain. She must tell him.

She retraced her steps, and reached the stage-door, it chanced, as two or three of the members of the orchestra were leaving it; she put her shyness from her, and asked one of them if he could give her Mr. Seaward's address. He could not, and referred to a second, who suggested in turn a third. Jane felt her cheeks redden.

But when, once more, she turned towards home, she was saying a number and the name of a street over and over to herself that she might remember them, and what else mattered? In the omnibus by which she travelled presently, she found courage to borrow the conductor's pencil, and she wrote the ad-

dress on the envelope of a letter she found in her pocket.

She let herself in with her key, and was going up to her room when a voice called to her.

"That you, my dear?"

Jane paused, catching her lower lip between her teeth.

"Yes, Mrs. Kerridge."

"Come in a minute."

There was a sound of some one moving across the floor and the door of Mrs. Kerridge's room was opened.

"I don't think I will to-night."

"Oh, just a minute," said Mrs. Kerridge. "Here 's Mrs. Atwell here who 'd like to tell you the little bit of good fortune as has come to her and hers."

Mrs. Kerridge looked radiant. Jane saw that something had happened. Mrs. Atwell was sitting by the table. The news was soon told.

Mr. Atwell had, by the death of a distant relation, come in for a little freehold property at Bermondsey —a ten-roomed house with a few square yards of garden, and a small legacy.

Jane forgot her trouble, and flushed with sympathy. Mrs. Kerridge pointed to the table. Jane shook her head. Mrs. Kerridge insisted.

"Not eat a bit of supper top o' that!" she cried. "My word! You set down and take y' coat off and let Mrs. Atwell tell y' all about it."

She would take no denial. Jane suffered herself to

be persuaded and, to please her, ate a few mouthfuls of cake. There were the remains of some hot dish, but when Mrs. Kerridge nodded in its direction, Jane, listening to Mrs. Atwell, who was speaking the while, shook her head again, and compromised matters by helping herself to the cake.

"You 'll find a drop of beer in the jug," Mrs. Kerridge whispered in parenthesis.

Jane acknowledged the intimation with a smile, and turned once more to the other. Jane knew that 'Arry's mother was thought a pretty woman, but now she saw for the first time how pretty Mrs. Atwell could be. Her cheeks were glowing and her eyes shone. She was happy and excited. Prosperity illumined her as sunshine a landscape.

She laughed once or twice of sheer elation.

"It is n't as if we 'd ever had the least expectation from Jow's cousin. We did n't 'ardly know 'im, not to speak to, and when Jow got the letter this mornin' you could 'a' knocked either of us down with a straw. Yes, it only come this mornin', and it 's been a day, I can tell y'."

"A sort of day as don't come every week," said Mrs. Kerridge.

"Jow went off to the lawyer first thing — somewhere Lincoln's Inn way, and I tell y' I could n't settle to nothing till 'e come 'ome. I kep' on thinkin' suppose it was a 'oax, after all. I did n't durse to let myself believe it."

"But it was true?" said Jane.

"I'd only got to look at Jow's face when he come back. You should 'a' seen 'Arry. His dadda took him out and bought a box of soldiers, and he would n't part with them not for a single minute. He says 'Dadda's a rich man,' he says, and all dinner-time he 'ad one of them soldiers on the table beside his plate, and this afternoon, when I took 'im to my sister at Kennington where he's stayin' the night, — it's her Charley's birthday, and she 'd promised 'Arry should come, — he took 'em with 'im to show his cousins. 'E's a fair caution."

"It's nice to see children happy," said Jane.

She went up to her room presently. The weight at her heart was less heavy. She had fallen under the spell of Mrs. Atwell's exhilaration.

The morning came before it seemed due, and Jane could only suppose that she had slept soundly. As she found herself still sleepy when habit or sounds about the house first awoke her from deep slumber, she suffered herself to rest on for a time. Trouble and anxiety awaited her, she knew, as soon as she should emerge from the haze of drowsiness that enshrouded her senses and lulled them. The world seemed a distant place that had little concern with her. So she lay quite still, with her eyes closed, and her mind just active enough to be conscious of inactivity. The sounds in the house stole in to her as through padded walls. A window was thrown open, a door slammed. Some one was humming. There was an occasional clink of spoons and teacups.

Gradually the sounds grew more distinct, the knowledge that disquietude impended, less alienable. There came the moment of effort, and Jane had risen, was awake (this the seeming order of events), and knew that she had brought about Michael's dismissal.

On Sunday morning it was Jane's invariable custom to go to church. With her mother she had always done so, but to-day, harassed in mind as she was, she felt that, lips and limbs compliant, her thoughts would be beyond her own control. She dressed herself after she had settled her room, and went out.

At Waterloo Station she learnt that she had missed one train for New Cross, and that there was not another for nearly two hours. A porter, of whom she made enquiry, volunteering that he lived "New Cross way" himself, directed her how best to get there.

Her journey, as we know, was fruitless. Jane, who had not knocked at the door of the house in which Michael lodged without considerable trepidation, heard that he was out with feelings of blended relief and disappointment. The landlady did not know when he would be in. Jane said that it did n't matter: she would write; and turned away. She could not wait for an indefinite return, nor could she at once make up her mind to repeat the expedition later in the day. It would be best to write. What could she have said to him, after all? But oh, he would have known how sorry she was, and now he would not know till to-

morrow. She had not left her name. It had not been asked and she had not given it. The interview with the young woman who opened the door had lasted but a few seconds. Jane was too shy to prolong it, and she wanted to get away. She was conscious, at the back of her wish to see Michael, of a fear lest he should return and surprise her . . .

The afternoon saw her attempts to compose a letter to him. It was a delight to find herself addressing him, but when she had written "Dear Mr. Seaward" her ideas failed her, — yet not her ideas, but words to express what she felt. She wanted him to know that she grieved for him; that his absence from the orchestra caused her personal sorrow; that hoping against hope she had watched for his appearance, and, above all, that she was not in ignorance of what had taken place. That took her thoughts to Curley, and again she thought of him without resentment. Did she scent danger in the tendency of thus recalling him? She passed her hand over her eyes and looked at the sheet of paper before her. A bottle of ink stood in front of it, — a penny bottle with a chipped mouth and grooves on which to rest a penholder, — a bottle that was symbolical of her literary attainments. In her hand was the pen, and the pen would not write. She went to the fire and knelt down before it. She fell into reverie as she looked at the heart of the glowing coals.

In the end her letter to Michael was very short. It told briefly that she had gone to New Cross that

morning in the hope of seeing him, to tell him how sorry she was to have been the cause of the trouble that had come upon him; that she hoped he would believe how much the news of his leaving had grieved her; and that for all his kindness to her she was very grateful to him.

These things, in sentences strangely punctuated, and innocent of syntax, were embodied in the letter which Jane sent. It was no sooner posted than she wished it back. It seemed so inadequate. Yet what to say? — what more? She wished she had waited to ask Mrs. Kerridge how you spelt "grieved." She did not think in retrospect that "greaved" looked right, but probably Mrs. Kerridge, who could not write herself, owing, as was elaborately explained, to a stiffness in her finger joints, would not have been sure. Nor was she, it transpired, when Jane asked her afterwards as casually as she could. Mrs. Kerridge declared that it was so long since she had been at school and never at the best of times having been much of a writer ("As well you know it, dear, having written letters for me to Phœbe this year and a half and more"), she could not be certain.

"Grieved!" she repeated; "I don't know, I'm sure, and what 'a' you got to be grieved about?"

"Oh, nothing," said Jane; "I was only wondering — that's all."

She went back to her room to wonder other things. Would Mr. Seaward write to her? What would he think when her letter reached him? She supposed

his landlady would give it to him in the morning. She tried to imagine the scene. She liked the landlady's face. Her voice had been pleasant, too. Jane could hear her saying, "A letter for you, Mr. Seaward." Would he guess who it was from before he opened it? Had he guessed who it was who had called to see him that day? Well, the letter was gone and she felt easier in her mind.

Bells were ringing for evening service. Jane heard them, and they revived in her little instincts of piety. She remembered how her mother had loved the sound of them, and with the thought of her mother came a wish to do what would please her. She would go to church.

She dressed herself once more and went out. The streets were thronged with strolling people. Girls and their lovers, hand in hand, sauntered along the pavements, girls in couples seeking lovers innocently, and sometimes a girl seeking lovers for bread. From such a one Jane, hardly understanding, shrank timidly as skirt brushed skirt. The public houses were busy, their lights shining out on to the road. Omnibuses, small rest for them, ran without cease, yet, out of respect for the day (indirect enough in probable motive), not a conductor but was better dressed than usual.

Jane walked briskly, noting all in her unconscious way, and making for the church to which her mother had oftenest gone. Not six months back she had walked with her along this very street. The service

had begun when Jane went in. She made her way to the free seats and sat down. Her little prayer had not very definite form, but her letter to Michael had a part in it. That it might all come right was the gist of her petition.

CHAPTER IX

CURLEY MERINO, thanks to the intervention of the law, found himself none the worse for what an evening paper called the "Fracas between a Music-Hall Artist and a Musician." Curley saw the paragraph in question, and put his finger on the word Musician. He spoke of a drum, raised his eyebrows, and said "Eh!" with beguiling innocence. Interrogated, he professed a complete (albeit twinkling) ignorance as to the motive of the assault that had been made upon him. Madame Merino indulgently dared say, as others had conjectured, — Nelly Chingford for handy example, — "that if the truth were known he'd been in some mischief"; and the head of the troupe, the great Merino whom Curley called Father, put his tongue in his cheek and winked at the boy's mother. Strictness of discipline in the Merino family was reserved for all that concerned their profession. Perky knew what it was to have his ears boxed for wandering attention, and even Curley himself, to within the last year or two, — which, seeing his rapid development, had more or less emancipated him, — could have spoken to the efficacy of a tingling reprimand. Not that one or other often had need of the fillip. You had only to watch them going through their performance to know that they loved their work. On the whole, the Merinos were a united family

enough, casual and undemonstrative amongst themselves, but by no means lacking in affection. Curley stood to a certain extent apart from the rest by virtue perhaps of his exceptional beauty, and you would have seen that it was tacitly accepted that Curley should always receive more than he gave, but no ill-will appeared to be engendered on that account. Curley was Curley. That was why. Perky would have told you so, and Lena and Fritz.

Perky and Lena and Fritz were in awe of Curley, nevertheless. A word of censure from his lips was more potent in its effects than a volley of abuse from either of their parents, and Curley's praise they thought praise indeed.

Perky was elated for a fortnight once because Curley had asked to be taught a peculiar elaboration of the common "Flap Flap" which the younger lad with untiring determination had worked out for himself. Curley acquired the trick of it in a day and a half, and did not scruple to annex his brother's invention, nor by the grace of his shapeliness to give to it a delicacy which Perky's own performance could never achieve. Perky felt no envy. He looked at his lean limbs sometimes, and wondered whether they would ever fill out.

Curley, for the temporary notoriety which attached to him as the result of his encounter with Michael, got a special round of applause on his appearance at the Mocha on that Saturday night, and two or three people wanted to drink with him. He drank with

them all, and his cheeks were flushed in the train as he journeyed eastwards. Madame Merino, easy-going and indolent, looking at his sparkling eyes, experienced a sudden misgiving and was moved to say abruptly: —

"Take care, my son."

Curley laughed.

"What's up?" he said.

Lena and Fritz were alert at once and turned questioning looks in his direction. Merino from the other end of the carriage glanced at him also. Perky was reading a penny dreadful and did not move. Thus he employed all his spare moments.

"What's the matter with you?" said Curley collectively.

"Never mind," said his mother.

"Then what did you say 'Take care,' for?"

"Never mind," said his mother again. "But 'take care' I do say."

She fell into silence and two little upright lines appeared presently in her forehead. Merino applied a match to his pipe and made no comment. Perky unfolded his periodical, turned over a page and folded it again to a small square. Originally to facilitate its speedy transference to or from the pocket of his coat, this folding of the literature on which he fed a ravenous imagination had become a matter of habit. He could not read from an open sheet. Lena and Fritz continued an interrupted discussion on the demerits of a performance that had preceded their own.

Curley had thoughts which he kept to himself. With his legs stretched out and his head thrown back and a smile playing about his lips, he ruminated at his ease. The head that rested against the wooden panels of the carriage was full of projects. The rosy glow of wine tinted them. Curley found the world a good place enough, but he fancied he could make it a better. Anyway he meant to try. His eyes were half closed, and he opened them presently and looked round at the others.

He looked at his mother first. The light flickered upon her ulster and showed the wearing at the seams. It showed, too, an over-ripeness in her face and form. At forty Madame Merino was in truth a woman whose good looks had clung to her with wonderful fidelity and whose limbs were marvellously agile. A placid temperament and a good constitution had combined to keep wrinkles from her cheeks, but time was setting its mark upon her, none the less. She had not yet diminished aught of her share in the performance, but at this moment there revealed itself to Curley in recollection a sense of the unsuitableness of certain feats which it fell to her to execute. Curley had no fine feelings. He did not dismiss this thought as one that offended susceptibilities. He regarded it critically, and turned to the head of the family.

Merino père, known as "Monze,"—the witting or unwitting, the playful or deliberate, perversion of the abbreviated "Monsieur,"— was a man of somewhat large build.

He had a round face and a head of the bullet order, with hair that grew evenly to a peak in the middle of his forehead — a fact that had suggested to him, graduating as he had done at a time when foreign appellations were thought of advantage, the adopting of the French prefix to his foreign name. In his early days he had been a circus performer, and there were few things, that came indirectly under the head of his calling, to which he was not able to turn his hand. As a boy he had been equally at home on the bar and the high trapeze.

Now his body showed a tendency to stoutness which only the constant exercise of his profession kept under. A few months of enforced idleness and he would have found himself hampered by super-abundant flesh. That he did not find himself so hampered spoke to the man's strength of character. In a shifty world you could count on Monze Merino. His managers said so. What he promised, that he did.

But he had never had engagements of the first rank, and he had not been ill-contented with his lot.

Perky, on whom Curley's glance rested next, had talent of an order that was not to be overlooked. His inventiveness was surprising, and he had the infinite capacity for taking pains that has been exalted into the definition of a rare attribute, indeed. There was promise in Perky, and Curley respected his abilities. But Perky was not ornamental. He was lank and unfinished.

The callow Lena, a trifle angular, and the impish Fritz, completed a troupe that lacked uniformity. Curley knew why the appearances of the Famous Merino Family were confined to the smaller halls. Monze and Madame, Perky, Lena, Fritz, and he would never figure together in the bills at the Empire or Pavilion or Tivoli. He thought of a troupe he had seen at the Alhambra — artists not superior to Perky or himself, but a delight to the eye for accord and proportion. Regularity, balance, form, without these there could be no real success.

He went through his second performance in a dream. The hall known as "Rawlinses" in the Mile End Road had a rougher audience than that at the Mocha. Curley, piercing the haze of his preoccupation, noted vaguely the commonness of his surroundings. Gold was tarnished. Looking-glasses were mottled. The house was dingy as the people who filled it.

Monze did not appear to mind, nor Madame, who took everything as it came, nor Perky, nor Lena, nor Fritz. They did not seem out of place either.

Curley, while he waited for his turn upon the bar, lost himself in reverie. He looked back and saw the gradual forming of the troupe. Merino and a partner since dead had made the nucleus of it. To these two, the one marrying, had been added Curley's mother; and the children, as their years and the law permitted them, had made their individual appearances. He looked ahead. There was no future for a combination

such as this. Five years hence it would be performing still in small and outlying halls . . .

If it held together . . .

Lena and Fritz had bounded to the ground and were bowing. The sound of clapping filtered slowly into Curley's consciousness. It was his turn once more, and he swung himself lightly up on to the bar, where he sat for a moment surveying the shabby house while he rubbed his hands on a handkerchief drawn from his belt. Then he began his clean and graceful performance. He was swinging through the air now — a living wheel that changed from time to time the direction of its turning. A momentary vertical poising, a quick fall, and he had slung himself up to a sitting posture, to slip thence and hang from the knees for a brief space before lending his supple body to some new exploit. A wonderful ease and deftness marked his movements and illumined them. The rest of the family always watched him. They may not have been conscious of so doing, but the fact did not escape. He knew his work was good, and might well know it.

Perky was with him now on the bar. The two wove strange and beautiful patterns that left no record in the air. A double somersault, and they were bowing to a volley of applause.

Curley had another drink on his way home. Madame Merino frowned when he lagged behind the rest as they passed a public house. She turned and called to him: —

"You don't want anything before your supper," she said. "Come along home, there's a good boy."

"In a minute," said Curley.

"No. Now."

"I'll be in before supper's ready."

But Curley did not come in to supper at all. His mother commented upon the fact to her husband, who shrugged his shoulders.

"It's his family history I'm thinking of," she said. A remark which caused Lena to prick up her ears.

Madame Merino saw her alertness, and bade her sharply eat her supper.

"I don't want any more."

"Then you can go to bed, my dear."

"Not straightaway top of eating," said Lena. "I don't want to make my nose red."

"Off you pack," said Madame Merino, "and don't let me have to tell y' twice."

Lena grumbled and rose. Perky and Fritz soon followed suit.

"You might say a word to him when he comes in," Madame Merino said to Monze as she left the room.

Curley came in presently. But he was master of his tongue and his gait, and Merino forbore to reprove him. He looked at the boy steadily, nevertheless. Curley was not abashed. You could not abash Curley so.

"Well, I'll turn in," he said. "Good-night."

"Good-night," said Merino shortly.

Curley sat on the edge of his bed for some minutes before he began to undress. Perky and Fritz shared his room. Nor was it much of a place, he said to himself. But the future was still glowing. He was young, and that was glorious. Life was before him, and he meant to live. He gave a little laugh.

Perky raised himself on his elbow. Fritz was half asleep.

"Nothing," said Curley, "nothing. You lie down."

Perky obeyed at once. He was used to not being told things. Curley had never handed his thoughts round.

Merino came up the stairs with his quick, elastic tread, and presently sounds ceased in the house. The rumble of traffic was growing less continuous in the street. Curley's head nodded, and he fell into slumber. He dreamt that he was performing at the Empire to a house that watched him breathlessly. He could see and feel a thousand eyes upon him. He seemed to be by himself. Monze and his mother and Perky and Lena and Fritz were amongst those who looked on and applauded him. They were there, but a long way off, and divided from him by the footlights. He thought he heard them telling how he had once been one of them, and he thought he smiled at them pityingly. He had risen to fame; they had sunk to obscurity.

And then the bar upon which he was performing broke with a crash, and Curley woke.

CHAPTER X

JANE'S letter reached Michael safely and filled him with happiness. He read it through many times, and if the mistakes in her spelling did not wholly escape his notice, they did not make him love what she had written the less, but rather, as expressing her childishness and inexperience and simplicity, the more.

Yet (fate pleasing grimly to seize upon trifles for agents) the shortcomings of poor Jane's orthography had their share in deciding the issue of that which had begun for Michael on the night of Jane's first appearance, and for Jane herself at the moment when, having seen them before, she met and read the eyes of the drum. Nor were other issues uninvolved; and, by hazard, since the exact results of any one action cannot be determined, it may be that the fact that Jane spelt "grieved" with an *e* and an *a*, and "sorry" with one *r* had its part in settling the destinies of people the little scribe had never seen nor heard of.

Be which as it may, at this point Michael was induced to take a step which removed him from the immediate scheme of Jane's life, and on this wise: —

Having carried her letter over his heart in a pocket from which he had drawn it to read it again in the room behind the music shop while he waited for his pupil, and, all through the lesson that followed, with

intervals of recalling a wandering mind, having deliberated how he should answer it, he decided to write and take the letter to Little Petwell Street, there to be guided by circumstance whether or not he should ask to see Jane. That day he would have to look for employment, but the matter of the letter seemed far more pressing. He longed to see Jane, yet shrank from forcing himself upon her.

From the music shop and a pupil of more than usual stupidity (or so it seemed to him), Michael went back to his room to write. He wrote glibly a sheet, two sheets — and tore them up. Not so must he give himself rein. He sat then looking vacantly at the paper before him. Presently he shook himself free of the inertness that had followed the check upon his activity, and began to write once more. It was a staid and a chastened pen then that thanked Jane for her thought of the writer and begged her not to be distressed on his account. If he regretted his action, it was for its futility and not for the consequences, such as they were, to himself. This in so many words was the substance of the letter he was writing when Mrs. Sands came to his door to announce a gentleman to see him.

Michael looked at her absently.

Mrs. Sands repeated her statement, adding, "Shall I ask him to come up? Mr. Atherton, I think the name was."

Michael started to his feet, and hurried down to the front door, passing his landlady on the way.

Mr. Atherton held out his hand to Michael, who grasped it.

In the changes and chances of life master and pupil had not met since their parting at Birmingham, but an intermittent correspondence had been maintained between them. A threatening of consumption, happily no longer active, had kept Mr. Atherton abroad for the greater portion of the time that had elapsed since then, but the last couple of years, having seen his complete restoration to health, had enabled him to accept and hold an appointment of some importance in connection with a College of Music at Manchester. Thence he came now.

"This is good of you, sir," Michael said, flushing with pleasure.

"It is good to see you again, Michael."

"Come in, sir."

He led the way to his room, where he pulled forward the wicker chair, and invited Mr. Atherton to sit down.

"Let me look at you first."

Mr. Atherton took a long look at the young man whom he had left a lad. Michael stood the survey well. He was never awkward.

"Yes, I know you," Mr. Atherton said slowly: "you haven't changed really. I sometimes feared you might. You haven't. You were a boy — you're a man, but you're Michael still."

Michael looked pleased.

"How are you, sir?" he said, — "as well, I hope, as you look."

"Quite well, thank God."

He became preoccupied for a moment, his eyes wandering round the room and back to Michael.

"And this is where you live," he said then, and paused. "The fact is," he said, a moment later, and with a smile that took Michael back to the old days at Birmingham, "I am finding it a little bit difficult now to account — to myself, I believe, rather than to you — for the fact that we have not met all these years. Yet I have never lost my interest in you and all that concerns you. You must take that from me, Michael, though I have never come to see you before. First I was ill, as you know. Then I stayed abroad for precaution, but there are nearly eighteen months that I have been in England. It is true that I have hardly been in London at all. I am a very busy man, and my present duties keep me pretty closely tied to Manchester. But I might have been to see you, and I have n't. I just have n't, and I don't know how that has happened. Here I am, however, at last, and if you are one half as glad to see me as I am to see you — why, there are two people who are very glad, indeed, to see each other again."

"I can't say how glad I am," Michael said.

"I want to hear all about you — everything. Sit down and tell me."

Mr. Atherton's eyes fell on Michael's fiddle.

"Music," he said. "It 's still music."

"Still music," said Michael. He reached down his violin and held it towards his friend. "You remember, Mr. Atherton."

"So you've kept it all these years."

He took the violin from Michael and looked at it as one looks at an old acquaintance. Then the itch of the musician to hear the thing speak seized him and he stretched out his hand for the bow.

"Ah, play," said Michael, jumping up and taking down the bow. "Play."

Presently sound filled the little room and illumined it as sunlight gilds a landscape.

"Don't stop," said Michael; but Mr. Atherton smiled and shook his head.

"Can you spare this day to me? I want to see as much as possible of you. There's lost time to make up between us, and I am only in town till to-morrow. You're engaged in the evening, aren't you?"

"Not now."

"But the music-hall you told me about—and, by the bye, must it be a music-hall? I fear a little for my pupil's taste. You showed a very promising discrimination as a boy, Michael—"

"It—has to be what it can," Michael answered; "but it isn't even a music-hall now."

The story was soon told. Jane was incidental in it, and Mr. Atherton looked at Michael searchingly. But he did not say just then what was in his mind. That which had attracted him to Michael in the first instance was momentarily regaining its power.

"And the lessons?"

"There was only one to give to-day. It is over."

"What had you meant to do?"

Michael glanced at the table whereon lay Jane's letter and the letter he had been writing when Mrs. Sands came to tell him of his visitor. Mr. Atherton followed the direction of his eyes.

"I meant to look for another engagement."

"You were applying for something?"

"Applying?"

"Writing, I mean, about some post."

"Oh, no. I was writing to — a friend, that was all."

There was a moment's pause.

"I was answering Miss Tandem's letter — she blames herself for what happened."

"Tandem," said Mr. Atherton, "that's an odd name."

"Miss Jenny Tandem — it's her professional name."

It conjured up before Mr. Atherton the presentment of a type of woman sufficiently unlike little Jane! It would have been difficult to choose a title more misleading, and Mr. Atherton was not to be misjudged if he thought of raciness and a jaunty laxity. Michael's explanation that Jenny Tandem masked an actual Jane Smith did not (in the light of that which Mr. Atherton had pictured to himself) serve to prejudice him any the more in the young lady's favour. In which matter was fate unkind.

"Miss Jenny Tandem holds herself the cause of what resulted in your dismissal?"

Michael hesitated for a moment and held out Jane's letter. In import, its simplicity should have prevailed over its errors — would have done so to an unbiassed mind, and to the mind of Mr. Atherton himself under circumstances other than those that ruled the moment. But the fatal suggestions that hung round the word music-hall in its relative connection, added to the sinister conclusions he had drawn from the name, combined to conspire against our harmless Jane.

The ignorant little letter confirmed his impression. It was the one visible, tangible thing there was to represent the unknown Jane, and it did its fell work adequately.

The torn pieces of Michael's first letter were lying on the table. It was impossible not to deduce fresh inferences from such evidence. The lover's letter — the letter of the lover who begins to love, at least — is proverbially a letter written and rewritten. Ashes and fragments tell their tale of indecision. Too bold, too cold, and flames or rending! Mr. Atherton looked at Michael again.

"Can you wait a day to look for a new engagement?"

"Yes," said Michael. "One day won't make much difference."

"Then spend this day with me. Do you care for pictures? We might go to the National Gallery. We will lunch somewhere first."

Michael scarcely knew what to say, and said so.

"Nonsense. Shall we start at once?"

"Can you wait while I change?"

The suit Michael was wearing — a dark frieze suit of unobtrusive pattern and cut — was not in its first youth, but it was neat and became him well. In it, and, indeed, in whatever he wore, his appearance belied his station. His clean-shaven face and a thoughtfulness that characterized his expression gave him something of the look that marks a barrister, and his clothes in no way precluded such an impression being formed of him. By which token it may be noticed here as a small thing, but significant, that Mrs. Sands and her husband, and people of less refinement to boot, were impelled to call Michael "sir."

"Come as you are," said Mr. Atherton.

So Michael, when he had plunged his face in water and attended to his hands and his hair, did no more than put on a clean collar and another tie; and Mr. Atherton, looking at him glowing from the towel and the brush, felt, with that almost parental affection which Michael had always inspired in him, that of such a son he would have been justly proud. Not, be it said, that Mr. Atherton, who was barely forty, could have been Michael's father.

But when Michael was ready so far as his toilet was concerned, he begged Mr. Atherton to pardon yet a few more minutes' delay. He could not bear that Jane should think that an hour was lost in answering her letter. His own would have to be posted now, but that perhaps was best. . . .

Mr. Atherton took down a book from Michael's

shelves. The slightest frown lined his forehead. He heard the travelling of Michael's pen — with intermittent pauses (there seemed to be but a sentence or two to add); then the folding of the sheet of paper; another pause following: the writer was reading what he had written; a faint sigh, and the sound again of the pen, this time on the envelope. Now Michael was closing his letter, and now had risen and was waiting.

Mr. Atherton shut the book, and five minutes later the two men left the house.

It was a day for Michael to remember. The lunch at a quiet restaurant in companionship with an educated man was fraught for him with delightful impressions. He experienced, at first, a little nervousness, but by nature he was fastidious, and when, by observing Mr. Atherton neither furtively nor with obvious intent to imitate, he saw that what came naturally to him in his mode of eating and drinking was apparently in accord with the accepted manner of performing these functions, he took courage to give himself up to the happiness of the hour. Again, as he had felt dimly in Greenwich Park, Michael began to know what life might hold. Under the spell of well-being his soul seemed to expand. Mr. Atherton looked at him with manifest pleasure, and thought of the young woman into whose toils he was like to fall — Miss Jenny Tandem, forsooth, the plebeian Jane Smith who had written the ill-spelt letter — and said to himself, "The pity of it!" later (crediting Jane with

the wish to ensnare), "The infamy of it"; later again, as one who determines to foil nefarious design, "It must not be!"

Lunch over, they walked round to the National Gallery, a place which Michael had frequently visited before, but never under such happy conditions as those that marked this visit and this day. Mr. Atherton had something to say of each picture and painter. He subjected Michael's critical faculties to small tests, and found, as he expected, intelligence and an appreciation that was finely selective. With education, he said to himself, what might not be made of this young man, were it not for the millstones bestrewing his path, and the neck so ready to receive them? A knot, thought Mr. Atherton, and, for the promising Michael, the bottom of the sea where dead men's limbs are washed this way and that, and whence there is no rising. It must not be!

Michael, having mentioned Jane as we have seen, said, however, no more about her. That he thought of her in his present happiness is none the less true. He read her into more than one picture. A child by Greuze had her inexperience, a madonna by Botticelli her innocence, a landscape by Constable her simplicity. Mr. Atherton, on his part, might have found semblances of his imagination of her in widely different subjects: in a Bacchanalian scene by Nicolas Poussin her irresponsibility; in the Money Changers of Teniers her pitilessness; in women of Rubens her coarseness — forgetting that Michael, as Michael, the

Michael he loved, would be attracted by none of these things.

By this time he was revolving a scheme in his mind. He did not mention it at once.

"You 'll dine with me," he said — "quietly, as it is called: I shan't dress; and we 'll see if we can get in at one of the theatres."

Michael wished nothing better than an evening with his friend.

In due time they were seated at a small table in a restaurant, where you could dine as you would or you were, and Michael did not feel ill-dressed. The table Mr. Atherton chose was one of many in a circular gallery whence you could see the hall below filled with other diners. It was a new world to Michael. To-morrow he would return to the old. For him, as for Cinderella, a clock would presently strike. Meanwhile, however, he was alert to all that was happening around him, and once more receiving impressions as sand the record of ripples on an ebbing tide.

Mr. Atherton led him to speak of himself and his prospects.

Michael shook his head at the last. . . .

"But I have wanted employment before," he said, "and found it. I suppose something will come."

"You wish definitely to make music your profession — in one branch or another?"

"If I can, Mr. Atherton. I shall look out for another engagement somewhere. I can get along with

that and the lessons I give. I advertise in a couple of papers from time to time and I get pupils."

Michael paused and smiled.

"It must seem odd to you, sir, my having anything to teach."

"On the contrary, you were an apt learner."

Michael fell into silence. There was a point of red light shining like a ruby near his plate, where the light struck through the claret in his glass on to the tablecloth, and on this flaming point his eyes rested. Its generous beauty seemed symbolical of the colours that had tinted this day. If Jane could have shared in his joy, he thought.

But fate and Mr. Atherton were thinking otherwise.

"Michael, have you any ties to keep you to London?"

"Ties?"

He looked up.

"No engagement? No thought of hampering yourself with a wife?"

He did not answer for a moment. Then he said, "I'm not in a position to think of a wife, sir."

But he flushed as he spoke, and Mr. Atherton knew, as well as if Michael had said so, that his thoughts went careering in the track of the letter he had posted that morning.

Coffee was brought presently, and cigarettes.

"Are you studying at all?"

"As best I can. I try to teach myself."

"You wish to learn."

"Oh, yes."

Mr. Atherton took a cigarette and lit it. He seemed to be thinking something out. He smoked very slowly; Michael more quickly, as one accustomed to a pipe.

"Then come to Manchester," Mr. Atherton said at last; "I can give you work and lessons."

CHAPTER XI

A MONTH back Michael could have jumped at such a chance as this. Now he was loth to tear himself from London which had taken to itself, anxious as was his life, such a charm as no other place could have for him. There had been times when he had hated its merciless streets and its cheerless skies.

Yet if he stayed?

The wonderful evening was over. He had seen Mr. Atherton back to his hotel after the play, and was to take a day to consider his proposal. If he went, he was to go as soon as might be.

To go or stay? He lay awake living again through the day of strange things and trying to come to a decision. The advantages of Mr. Atherton's offer were incontestable. In the first place, there was Mr. Atherton himself. Michael had never forgotten his first friend. To be with him had always seemed to him as happy a state as could be imagined. Thereto — proximity to his master — was added the promise of employment and of such opportunities of study as would be to his lasting benefit. His education was woefully meagre. The prospect of learning under such a master as Mr. Atherton was one to open up prospects, indeed.

But against his accepting was the thought of re-

moving himself from the possibility of an occasional glimpse of Jane.

Yet, yet, yet, — if he stayed?

What chance had he, ignorant and without interest, of making for himself such a position as would even insure to him freedom from care for the necessities of life? Without this the future could promise him little.

Merciless indecision tortured him. The rack pulled him this way and that. That the responsibility of the choice might rest in some degree with chance or the powers that be, he made a semblance of employing the hours that were allowed him for deliberation, in a tentative search for an appointment in town. He went up to the little hall at Islington where he had once had a short engagement. The orchestra was complete, as he had expected. He went then to the conductor of a small band playing for dances and the like in which he had filled a place for a week when he first came up to London. In this it happened that he could have found a billet. He had known that he could always earn a living, and no serious fear on this score had assailed him. A revulsion of feeling at the thought of the future he would be sacrificing immediately seized him. He rejected what he had sought and went home. This meant that he had made his choice. Yet he did not write to Mr. Atherton till the last minute.

By return of post came a letter applauding his decision, and enclosing in advance of such salary as

he had offered a cheque for a quarter's term. With part of this, Michael got what outfit he needed and generally settled up his affairs.

He was in doubtful spirits as he made his final arrangements. The few pupils he had were easily disposed of. To those of them who had paid for their lessons beforehand, he returned that which was owing; and he parted with all on good terms.

Mrs. Sands heard with genuine regret that he was leaving her. She had never had a lodger who had given less trouble. His consideration of her had not missed recognition.

Mr. Atherton (with the noisy, shameless, — possibly shameful, — vulgar, ignorant, and fatally alluring Jenny Tandem in mind) urged an early date for Michael's coming. Michael acquiesced.

There was nothing to be gained by waiting, and he fixed a day for his going. He had written to Jane to tell her of the change in his plans, and it only remained for him to say good-bye to her — and to keep silence on all else that he would say. For what right had he to tell her the thing that clamoured to be told?

But before he spoke to her, he must see her once unseen. He spent his last evening but one in the gallery at the Camberwell Palace, and waited in a fever of impatience, and apprehension, too, for her appearing. She appeared. She was like a little child. She was like a white flower. He leant heavily upon the rail and forgot his motley surroundings.

He would not speak to her to-night. That he would keep for to-morrow's sad pleasure. But he might be near her without her knowledge.

He left the gallery and went round to the back of the building, and stood in the darkness till she came out. Then, keeping in the shadow of the houses, he followed her to the open street.

He went home restless and unhappy. The sight of her and the sound of her voice had made it tenfold harder for him to leave the town that held her. He knew that he had loved his master exceedingly, but the glimpse of Jane could make his image indistinct. He spent a night of sighing and strange pain.

The next day he packed the few things that belonged to him. His wicker chair he decided must be left behind, experiencing as he did so no little regret. The acquiring of it had marked a period of seeming prosperity in his fortunes, and it was associated in his mind with much that endeared it to him. When once it had been represented by a pawn ticket, he had felt like one who has a friend or a brother imprisoned and waiting his ransom, until the day that saw it back in its accustomed place. He gave it to Mrs. Sands. She demurred about taking it, and only consented to accept it on condition that Michael should have it back whenever he returned to London.

"And your room, too, Mr. Seaward. If ever you want it again, you shall have it whoever goes without. I don't care who takes it, out he shall turn. That's what we think of you here, sir."

Michael could not but be touched.

"I've been very happy with you," he said, and knew then, as by a revelation, that it was true. Was happiness always a retrospective thing? And was that one of life's lessons?

He wished for the evening, and strained towards it as if by will he would push time behind him. Yet he dreaded its coming. At the best, it would bring him keenest suffering. He thought of the night and the morrow with a shudder. Then he was assailed by the fear lest anything should happen to prevent his seeing Jane. Suppose she should not be at the hall that evening! Music-hall artists often failed to put in an appearance, and others filled their place. She had been at her post on the previous night. What had hindered him to join her then? Nothing but the desperate wish to keep that last meeting with her in reserve; and now, perhaps, he would be cheated of it. Fate loved such sorry jests.

It was with an anxiety that he could scarcely control that, some hours later, Michael stood in the gallery watching for Jane's turn. Variety was the order of the house, and many changes had taken place in the programme since he had left the orchestra. Lilla of the Hazardous Wire no longer caused Camberwell to bate its breath. A tedious sketch was new to Michael, — or had been new to him the night before, — and a couple of musical clowns and a ventriloquist replaced other performers who had left. But Jane was still in the bills.

He saw her mistily at first, so agitated was he, but by the time she had reached the refrain of her first verse and the house was beginning to sway to the insidious rhythm of its cheap cadences, Michael was under his own control. The song apart from the singer must have shown itself banal enough, but it never appeared so to him. In truth, he never thought of it apart from her.

She employed little gesture as she sang, and in this respect her method differed considerably from that of most singers. Inexperience, it was probable, was accountable for a thing that marked her out from the rest. Michael did not take it wholly for conscious art. He accepted it rather as indicative of Jane's good taste. Simplicity was the keynote of her character.

When Jane had done her dance, Michael left the hall. He wanted to carry away with him the memory of her as he had just seen her. It was a wrench to tear himself from his place while yet she was to reappear, and he knew that afterwards he would be sorry as well as glad that he had done so; but he wished nothing to mar his last impression of her. To have stayed for her second song that night would have seemed disloyal to her. He knew that she did not understand its lax significance, and that she had been taught to sing it as certain birds are taught to speak (for which he loved her), but he knew also that memory plays strange tricks. He would think of her as a child and a white flower.

He descended the stone stairs, and noted vaguely

that they were damp. A woman holding three oranges was sitting on the lowest step. Her shawl was sprinkled with drops of water. He shook his head as she proffered her wares. She stumbled to her feet and followed him to the door, where an exclamation of dismay broke from him, and he stood still.

"Yes, it's rainin'," said the woman, "come on 'ard a good hour ago. I'm wet through, that's what I am."

"Rain," said Michael. "Rain!" as if he did not believe his eyes.

"Looks like it," said the orange-seller sententiously.

Michael glanced up and down the street. The pavements were shining where lights fell upon them.

The woman took up her grumbling.

"Wet through, I am," she said again, though it was not true, for she had sat in more or less undisturbed shelter since the beginning of the shower.

"Wet through *and* through, and not a orange have I sold to-night. It's very 'ard as a poor woman can't earn a honest livin', try 'ow she may. I've slaved an' slaved, an' my 'usband's a brute beast as lays at 'ome, an' I got to keep 'im. Work! Not 'im. 'E won't stir a foot except it's to raise it to me or the poor little children. Call 'imself a man! They're beasts, all of 'em, and you might 'ave a orange off me to buy a bit of bread."

She rambled on, and became a widow.

In short, she pleaded lamely.

"But the price of half a pint," she said, and "for luck."

"Whose?" said Michael. He told himself he had none, and looked at the steady rain.

"Whose what?"

"Whose luck?"

"Why, yours, my sonny. I'm past it. But beer I can taste still, praise Gawd, and I'll drink y'r 'ealth like a lady, and the 'ealth of your sweetheart, too."

A bought and maudlin blessing seemed better than none to Michael just then, and with the orange-seller's benedictions ringing in his ears he went round to the back of the house to wait the coming of Jane.

A shabby one-horsed brougham was standing at the door. The driver with a pipe in his mouth was talking to the stage doorkeeper loudly. The horse's head drooped in the rain, and now and then the animal lifted a foot patiently.

Jane was long in appearing.

Michael, under the wall opposite, wished the brougham would move away. It blocked his view, as it stood, with the rain beating upon it, between him and the door he had come to watch. He began to hate the scratched panels that showed the beating of the rain. He began to hate the common coachman with his strident voice.

Ah, the rain, the rain!

He had hoped Jane would walk, perhaps, the greater part of the way home. He had thought that in the mildness of the night the pace might be slow,

and so the walk prolonged. Now he did not dare to think how matters would arrange themselves. He only thought to himself how much he hated the brougham. It stood for a type of the things that baulked his desire

CHAPTER XII

JANE meanwhile was not, as may be supposed, unmoved by the news of Michael's intended departure. She cherished his two letters for solace and read them for what she fancied lurked between the lines. She had watched the time for his going approach with heart as well as sense alert. The exact day she did not know. He spoke of the end of a certain week. He would come to say good-bye. Surely he would come — surely — surely . . .

So much did she count on, knowing Michael. On the night that was his last, she, ignorant that it was indeed his last and as ignorant that he was present, thought she had sung well, and would have been happy but for the sorrow she was nursing. She was about to go home when she heard of the rain.

"Cats and dogs," said her informant, the redoubtable Nelly Chingford. "How do you go, dear?"

Jane told her.

Miss Chingford was singing at the Metropolitan and the Canterbury as well as the little hall in Camberwell, and what she called her Bro'ham was waiting.

"I'll drop you if you like," she said good-naturedly. "It won't be much out of my way. Nonsense, my dear, I'd like to."

Jane then accepted the kindness gratefully.

She stood back at the door of the carriage.

"Jump in, my dear."

She obeyed. The window next which she seated herself was streaked and studded with rain, so that it was impossible to see through it very clearly. Some one came across the road. Jane caught her breath. She fancied . . . she could not be sure . . .

But at this moment her companion stepped in with a rustle of skirts, and almost before the door was shut they were off.

"What are you looking at?" Miss Chingford asked as she settled herself.

Jane drew back from the window.

"Nothing — a man in the rain."

She could with difficulty collect her thoughts. If that should be Michael! Almost she was urged to say, "Oh, I must stop. I must get out —" words which she rehearsed to herself but did not speak. How could she explain? Moreover, the driver whipped up, and the horse, accustomed to work against time, responded to the lash. Too late, thought Jane, too late! And if it were not Michael! And if, indeed, it were, what then? She sat in chafing misery while the carriage bore her away.

Nelly Chingford talked, and the unhappy Jane tried to listen. But she could not, and her answers were sometimes incoherent, and sometimes wide of the mark. She felt like one in a cage, and, as another had done before her, she conceived an exceeding hatred of the carriage itself. More than once she was

minded to throw appearances to the winds and tell Miss Chingford everything. Oh, to be afoot, to be afoot!

Yet what good to be afoot? If she went back, Michael would be gone. For it had been Michael. She was sure of it — knew it now that the knowledge could profit her nothing.

"Oh," she said inwardly, and "Oh," and "Oh," and "Oh."

Nelly Chingford, vaguely conscious of a disturbing element, peered at her in the darkness once or twice.

As the carriage neared Little Petwell Street, Jane roused herself with an effort. She had been leaning back in her corner and as she sat up the lights of a public house flashed upon her pale face and her companion saw the trace of tears.

In a moment Miss Chingford's arms were about her.

"Why didn't you tell me, little girl? You're in some trouble and I didn't know, and here I've been chattering all the time."

"It's nothing," said Jane — "nothing that any one can help."

She cried a little with Miss Chingford's arms tightly round her and Miss Chingford's voice whispering tenderly in her ear, and felt better.

"But I won't," thought Nelly Chingford to herself. "It's a shame and I won't. She shall tell me only what she wants to. Poor little kid!"

So, though she burned with curiosity, she asked

no question either then or at any subsequent time — a thing that I have always thought showed the stuff that the woman who called herself "The Joy of London" and sang of lax morals was made of.

The carriage stopped. Jane saw that she had reached home. She thanked her friend and kissed her, and then, as she stood at the door fumbling for her key, the coachman impatient to get to bed drove on. Nelly Chingford kissed her hand to her from the carriage window.

Jane opened the door and went in. No sooner had she done so, and sick at heart was standing in the gloomy passage, than there fell upon her ears the sound of running steps ringing upon the pavement outside. The sound increased in intensity as the runner approached, and then it stopped dead at the door she had just shut. Jane listened, and as she stood still the chain she had been about to adjust slipped from her hand and rattled — on the happening of which a movement outside was to be heard at once and then a faint tapping upon the door.

She did not move.

The tapping was repeated, and a little louder.

It had been arranged that Jane, as the last at this time to come in, should fasten the hall door unless a light was burning in the passage, when it was to be understood that another of the inmates of the house was still abroad. There were three other sets of lodgers besides herself — a young woman who occupied the back room on the ground floor and went

out charing by day; an old tailor and his wife who lived and worked on the first floor, in two rooms and sufficiently comfortable circumstances; and a couple of middle-aged women who earned their living by embroidery, and had the front top room next to that of Jane. Jane knew the methodical habits of all these people, and the light having been extinguished in the passage it was unlikely that any one of them was out at this moment. While she hesitated, the tapping made itself heard yet again.

Jane, timid by temperament, determined to open the door on the chain.

"Who's there?" she said through the gap thus limited.

A face showed itself there — close to her own.

"Oh, is it you?" said a voice, — "is it you!"

Jane gave a little exclamation under her breath. For a moment she shut the door once more to permit of unfastening the chain (which process she effected with trembling fingers), then once again she opened it, and found Michael standing outside in the rain. In the infinitesimal space of time that elapsed before he spoke, — and he spoke, it seemed, at once, — Jane saw that he was wet, and splashed with mud. She knew, before he told her, that he had run most of the way from Camberwell.

"I could n't go without saying good-bye to you," he said. "That's my excuse for being here at this hour."

"It was you, then! Oh, I was sure it was. I would have stopped the carriage if I could —"

She broke off. Heaven knew what admissions she had been about to make. She blushed, and then grew pale.

"I saw you get into it," Michael said. "I'm leaving London to-morrow morning. My only chance of seeing you for a moment was to get here before you."

"And you ran all the way —"

"That was nothing so that I was in time."

"And you're wet — oh you're wet through."

He shook his head.

"But you are, and you're standing in the rain now."

She cast about for some course of action. She could not ask him to come in. He could not stand outside with the rain pattering upon him, nor for that matter could she talk to him here at the door, where the sound of voices would be audible in Mrs. Kerridge's room at least. And she did not want him to go — at once.

There was an archway leading to a timber-yard a short way up the street, and on the opposite side of it. Jane's eyes lighted upon it, and some little indication of her thought must have showed itself in her face, for Michael looked round to see the direction of her gaze.

"We might stand there for a moment," he said.

Jane nodded. She shut the door as noiselessly as she could, and the two crossed the street together.

"I wonder how I should have accounted for myself

if it had not been you," Michael exclaimed as they reached the shelter. "I saw the brougham drive off just as I got to the corner of the street, and when I reached the door it was shut, but I heard some one moving inside. If it had not been you!"

"And you are going to-morrow," Jane said.

"To-morrow morning."

"For how long?"

"I don't know."

Crossing to the archway had been a false move. Blankness seized them both. There seemed nothing to say. Michael knew well the regret — the remorse, almost, that would follow upon this blankness, and Jane felt it dimly, but the tongue of each was tied. They talked, the pair of them, of the past and the future, but neither gave expression to what both were feeling under the numbness that stultified them jointly.

"I must n't keep you longer," Michael said at length. "Good-bye, Miss Smith."

"Good-bye," said Jane mechanically.

Michael took her hand.

"Oh," he said, "I wonder whether you will remember me when I come back."

"Yes," said Jane, "yes."

"You 'll have so much to think about. Why should you remember a poor devil like me. I must n't hope it."

Jane gave a little laugh. It sounded odd even to her own ears, as did the words she spoke.

"You are a man," she said.

He looked for her meaning.

"And men don't remember," she added.

"We shall see. I have heard the same of women."

Neither her cynicism nor his rang true. Oh, strange and horrible palsy that had them both! What they would not, that they seemed. What they would be, and what indeed each was, that nor one nor other could express.

Michael shivered once. A draught ran through the archway, and his clothes were damp. That he did not get a chill pointed either to the health of his vigorous frame or else to the nullifying property of the stupor that possessed him.

He made an effort to shake this off. "Fool! Fool!" he said to himself fiercely. The moments that should have been crammed with precious emotions were slipping by.

"May I write?"

"If you want to."

"I shall wish to."

"Very well."

Silence fell. There was not even a consuming necessity to keep talking.

But at that very last, and when they had crossed the street and were standing once more at the door of Mrs. Kerridge's house, their common paralysis left them like a fog that lifts. Each looked at the other like people emerging into daylight from the darkness of a long tunnel: or, for closer semblance,

for there was recognition in the look of each, like lover and lady who having met and sported in the masquerade cry "You!" "You!" at the dropping of masks.

A clock struck. Too late the finding of the souls!

"Good-bye," Michael said. "You'll never know how it grieves me to say it."

"I lost you your engagement," Jane said. "It's me that's sent you away."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"No," he said. "No."

"But it is. You'd have got the vacancy when it came only for me."

"Ah," he said, "you must n't look at your influence upon me in that light. If you knew . . ."

"Will this be good — what you've got?"

Michael hesitated.

"I suppose it would be called a splendid chance."

"Good money?" Elementary Jane used the terms of her class.

"More than money. I am to have an opportunity of learning. Mr. Atherton is going to teach me."

"Mr. Atherton. Is he kind?"

"The best and kindest friend a man ever had."

"I like him then — at first I did n't somehow; but I do."

"You would if you knew him."

The rain still fell. It splashed on Michael's hat.

"You must go," Jane said. "You must go."

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

Yet he lingered.

"Then I may write?"

"Oh, yes. It will be something to — I mean I should like to hear from you just to say how you get on in Manchester."

The last moment had come — the very last. He must not delay longer.

"Good-bye," he said again.

"Good-bye."

He was holding her hand once more. It seemed very slender and delicate in his own. He needed what self-control he could call up to keep his feelings in check. Jane's tears trembled on her eyelashes.

"Oh," he said, "take care of yourself. Take care of yourself."

Jane did not answer, she could not just then, and these words were the last words spoken.

CHAPTER XIII

So, for the time being, went Michael out of Jane's immediate life, and "the time being," in the economy of things generally, as the time that shapes the future while it sums up the past, may be called the time that counts. The going of Michael or, more narrowly focussed, that and his silence, had issues then of some moment in the story of Elementary Jane.

He went to wider horizons; the horizons of Jane did not promise to stretch. At first, indeed, they narrowed. A month of unoccupied evenings followed the ending of her engagement at the Camberwell Palace. Jane's hopes sank. Panic even seized her when day after day went by and Mr. Paton had no news for her. Nothing offered. Jane went this way and that on the chance of "extra turns." But, so it happened, without success. Artists better known stepped in; artists with interest, or it might be with agents more prominent. Jane often heard the names Swindon and Vans and sometimes wished . . . But Mr. Paton was very kind — kinder, perhaps, than she knew, when, speaking of the provinces, he advised her against venturing so far afield.

He was a coarse-grained man enough, but he recognized her timid innocence and respected it.

"If I let you go to Preston or Glasgow or Belfast,

and you were n't happy when you got there, what 'd you do all alone? You 're not like some. I don't believe that you 'd be able to take care of yourself. You 'd be scared to death amongst a lot of strangers. If you was of the yewsh'l sort, I 'd tell you to take anything that turned up anywhere, — it 's all experience, y' know, — but you 're not, and here in London you 've got friends, have n't you?"

"Yes, I 've got friends," said Jane.

"Well, try and manage somehow for a bit, and we shall find an opening for you before long. Don't you be afraid. It 'll come."

"Do you really think it will?"

"Set y' mind at rest. You did very well at Camberwell — great promise you showed, and I 've got Mr. Isaacs's word to give you another engagement later on. Ah, 'a bird in the 'and,' I know, and all that, still you 're only a beginner, you must remember, and you 've got to make your name, see. 'Rowme was n't built in a day,' as the saying is."

"No."

"Well, look in on Monday. Perhaps I might hear of something by then."

Jane went home with a heart of fluctuating weight. It was heavy enough by the time she reached Little Petwell Street.

"There, don't take on about it," Mrs. Kerridge said. "What 's this, Wednesday? There 'll come a letter, I d'say, long before Monday."

But there came no letter (not even one from

Michael), and Monday's visit to the agent was as fruitless as that of Wednesday.

Jane's face was white when Mrs. Kerridge, who was standing at her window, saw her pass to the door.

"I declare it's a shame," the good woman said, meeting her in the passage — "and you singin' as well as you done, and your dance, too. But don't choo lose 'eart, my pretty, nor yet worry about the rent. You can 'ave 'ome 'ere an' welcome if you do get a bit be'ind. I said it to y' mother drorin' 'er last breath. The very last thing before she passed away I said it, and I say the same to you."

Jane murmured her thanks and was moving on towards the stairs when Mrs. Kerridge (a kindly feeling with her always prompting hospitality) caught her hand.

"An' you're just comin' in to 'ave a cup of tea with me, that's what you are. I'm not going to let you go doin' without things for the sake of puttin' together the price of your room."

"Oh, I have n't got to do without, really," Jane said; "there's still some of mother's money."

She was tired and discouraged. She had walked to and from Mr. Paton's office to save the money she would have had to spend had she travelled by omnibus. She suffered herself to be persuaded, and followed Mrs. Kerridge into her room. It seemed a long time since the supper-party that had been held there in her honour and to commemorate her first success. She

wondered whether any further success whatever was in store for her. She was in a mood to jump to mournful conclusions.

She had now four songs in her repertory and a couple of dances — meagre stock in trade, it must be admitted, but not altogether inadequate. She learnt quickly and had perseverance. A year, two years would see her not ill-qualified for the line she had chosen. But she must live while this year, these two years passed, and how to do that if engagements failed her?

The month of disappointment dragged itself out. Jane denied herself all but the barest necessities. There was a day when she ate her bread dry from reluctance to face the terror of knowing that she had broken into her last pound. On this day came Michael's promised letter, and brought solace in telling of his welfare. But it was reticent of his feelings, having been written, though Jane knew it not, with a pen on which the severest curb had been put, and Jane sighed over it while she cherished it.

She thought of something Nelly Chingford had once said about men and the deep blue sea.

And were they all alike? Miss Chingford said "Yes," in imaginary colloquy. She represented cynicism; Jane, faith, and held "No! No!" with warmth and reiteration. Try 'em. Jane's range was limited. She was always to be found contrasting Michael with Curley in what was, moreover, only an estimate of the character of each.

Michael you might trust; swear by, if need be. Curley you must follow with your eyes . . .

These the thoughts to which Michael's reticence gave rise in the mind of anxious Jane. She even forgot her anxiety for a time in the contemplation of the thought that remained steadfast and unassailable as the conclusion of the whole matter. Anyway, you could trust Michael. She said that to herself many times.

The next day her bread (even her dry bread!) being finished and her tea a pinch of black dust in the bottom of the caddy, Jane unwrapped her last pound. She looked at it long even to the seeing of undiscovered details in the bust of the sovereign, and the presentment of St. George and the Dragon. There were things she might have pawned, — the tea-caddy, for ready instance, — but "putting away" Jane held the last resource of all. So with her pound in her pocket she went out to buy food. Never before had housekeeping cost her such misgiving. She spent fivepence and returned with her change and her modest parcels. A telegraph boy, whistling, and an embodiment of restless energy, was walking up the street in front of her, peeling an orange as he went. He caught her attention. His whistling was very shrill. She found herself disliking him. How strange to be so noisy and so mischievous. Orange peels traced his path along the pavement. Jane with her foot pushed into the gutter such pieces of the treacherous yellow rind as she met on her way. The task

was troublesome if voluntary. Horrid boy. Now he was eating the fruit — an ugly function as he performed it. Jane knew this rather then saw it, for she walked behind him. His mouth must be smeared — how horrid! — but at least its occupation stopped his whistling, for which one might be grateful.

Her nerves were all on edge. Anxiety and a day's dry bread had tried them. They, rather than she, seized upon the offending boy to work off upon him the spleen they had engendered. A minute later her heart jumped. The boy looked at the numbers on the doors, and stopped at Mrs. Kerridge's house. Jane ran forward, asking the name on the envelope, telling her own; Jane Smith.

As she spoke she sighted "Tandem."

He shook his head.

"You 're from the wrong side of the door, y' see," he said, grinning.

"But it 's for me," said Jane, choking with excitement.

"You said your name was Smith."

"So it is, but it 's Tandem, too."

"H'm, I 'll wait till they come."

Never before had Mrs. Kerridge been so long in answering a bell.

Jane chafed.

"Tandem," said the boy when Mrs. Kerridge appeared.

"Tandem?" echoed Mrs. Kerridge.

"It 's for me," cried Jane.

Mrs. Kerridge grasped the situation.

"That 's right," she said.

The boy looked suspicious: "How am I to know?" he began — but delivered the telegram into her hand. Jane took it from her, trembling.

"He would n't give it to me," she said, as she tore the envelope open.

"Well, she said her name was Smith," said the boy again. He was combative, and his face was smeared with orange juice; but when next Jane looked at him her feelings had wholly changed, and she saw in him the beauty of one who brings good tidings.

She followed Mrs. Kerridge into her room.

The message was from Mr. Paton. He had secured for Jane a trial at the Edgware, to be followed by an engagement if she gave satisfaction; and wanted to see her at once. Kindness must have prompted all but the bare summons. Jane counted the words to a total of twenty-three, and blessed Mr. Paton in her heart. Mrs. Kerridge kissed her.

"What did I tell you?" she said, and "It's the turn of the tide."

"I hope so."

"I know it."

"If it only is!"

"You 'll see."

Jane ran up to her room and changed her hat.

"I 'm off now," she said when she came down.

By chance the sun shone out as she opened the

door. Mrs. Kerridge had followed her to the steps. She nodded at the gilded street.

"For you, dear; look!"

As Michael once, so did Jane take heart at the shining of the sun.

"Perhaps," she said. "Oh, perhaps, perhaps," and laughed over her shoulder as she hurried away.

She sped to the dingy office, drawing to the extent of twopence for omnibus fares upon her capital and her belief in the future.

Hope restored to her, Jane could hope with the most sanguine. You had only to look at her to see that. Her eyes were shining and her cheeks aglow. On foot, she walked rapidly, breaking more than once into a run; sitting on top of the omnibus, she leaned forward in her seat. She was alert in every fibre. The blood was coursing through her veins as the sap was flowing then in spring woods — for the tardy spring had come. The sight of a tree told Jane what she might have known ten days. She smiled to herself, and pictured half unconsciously how London, even murky London, was decking itself in greenest green. Little clean leaves were uncurling themselves and smoothing out their tender crinkles in every park and garden, where (yes, and on the house-tops) might be heard the note of nesting birds. The very heart of Jane burst into song.

The trot of the horses and the even swing of their glossy quarters kept time to the song of Jane's heart. The voice of the driver exhorting and coaxing had a

part in it. So had the faint jingle of the harness and the soft swish of a merciful whip, — imagined, this last, rather than heard, — while behind and through her singing swelled the roar and the clang and the hum and the buzz, the music of midday streets.

Jane left the omnibus, tingling with happy expectancy, at peace with the world, and came face to face with Curley Merino.

She had often wondered what her first meeting with him would be like, and had always thought of it as taking place at a music-hall. She had even rehearsed the frigid manner with which she intended to repress any attempts upon his part to renew the friendly relations that had existed before he surrendered his claim to her respect. She had proposed this and that, a distant bend, a turning on the heel, silence, and a command of her features; but Curley disposed as he would: made her laugh to begin with, rallied her on a wish to fight shy of him, was comelier than ever — comely to beguile saints! — and finally expressed penitence.

What could she do? Avowals of repentance from such lips, to an accompaniment of clear eyes, half serious, half mischievous, but pleading eloquently, were not to be resisted.

"Ah, you will forgive me, won't you?"

Jane, yielding, shook her head.

"You will. You will."

"I don't think I can."

"Oh, you can and you will."

"I'm not sure that I ought to."

"Ought, what is that? You must and will."

"I never meant to speak to you again."

"You have spoken."

"You spoke to me. I was n't thinking. You took me by surprise."

"You have forgiven me. I see it in your face."

"Then you see what is n't there."

"I'm not so clever."

"Clever enough."

The word took Curley off on an indirect trail to other matters.

"I've left the Family," he said — abruptly, as it seemed to Jane, and added, "Did you know?"

Jane looked at him with astonishment.

"Left the Family!"

He nodded, smiling at her wonder.

"Don't you think I was too good for 'em?"

"I never thought about it," said Jane.

This Curley was disposed to challenge, and began with a bantering "Oh, yes, you did!" but abandoned the matter on Jane's next words.

"What does your father say?" she asked. As yet she could only regard Curley's secession from the point of view of those who were left to get on without him.

"Monze?" said Curley. "It don't much matter what he says. He 's no father of mine."

Curley spoke with a heat that was reminiscent, no doubt, of circumstances attending the rupture. So

much Jane could understand, and the significance of the tone impressed her before that of the words themselves sent her gaze flying to his in sudden question.

"He'd no claim on me," he said. "Nor me on him. He's not my father."

"Not your father . . .! No claim . . .!"

Her eyes still on his recalled him to a sense of what was due to his mother.

"Oh, well," he said lightly, "he's my stepfather, of course. But, anyway, I'm old enough to choose for myself."

There was a pause during which Jane sought to determine between what he had first implied and the amendment. "Mr. Merino was so kind," she said then retrospectively, "and Madame, too. Are n't they vexed?"

"There was a bit of a row."

"And what are you doing?"

"It's not so much what I'm doing as what I'm going to do. Oh, you'll hear. Look out for The Three C's: You've heard of Camden and Carson. Well, I'm joining them."

"Fancy," said Jane.

She remembered her errand, having forgotten it for a few moments, and said she must be going.

"I'm forgiven, then?"

"I did n't say so."

"Ah, you must." The sun was shining on her hair and shining thence. "Come, you're not going to

deny me on a day like this. Say it. Say it. It's on your tongue now and your tongue's shut in behind your little cruel teeth. Such white teeth and so cruel! It wants to speak and they won't let it. Ah!"

Impossible, with his eyes laughing into hers, to keep the tongue a prisoner. Jane's lips parted to a smile, her pretty teeth to an answering laugh, and Curley was forgiven.

CHAPTER XIV

THEN did the heart of Jane misgive her. A disloyalty to Michael seemed to lurk in her forgiveness of Curley. She felt this, but did not wholly understand it, realizing only that the natures of Curley and Michael were antagonistic the one to the other, as the flesh is opposed to the spirit. She pondered upon the matter for three days, at the end of which, other things engrossing her, she relinquished the problem as one too hard for her and (unconsciously) awaited the course of events.

Fortune now saw fit to smile upon Miss Tandem. The soul of Elementary Jane might be perplexed and anxious, the path of Miss Tandem grew bright with promise. For success (a small figure, but not to be mistaken for failure, or even the colourless hybrid compounded of both) met her with outstretched hands. Not that the little singer had greatly feared for the result of her trial turn. The longing for the glare of footlights, and for the resultant sense of strange lights and shades upon the face — the light on the cheek-bones, a warmth almost under the eyes — for the sight of the drab patchwork of the house, and for the sound of fiddles and drums (oh, the drum, the drum, nerving her to victory in distant Camberwell !) — the longing for these things, I say, had been

too urgent to admit of her failing when once more she saw and felt and heard them.

Going home with Mrs. Kerridge from the Edgware, the ordeal over, Jane was in a heaven not far short of the seventh, the seventh itself holding at a guess success and Michael.

Jane brimmed and sparkled like spring water in a cup overflowing.

"Oh," she said, this (exclamation pointing her talk), and "oh" that, and "oh" and "oh." Two bright spots of healthy colour burned on her cheeks where the warm rouge had been.

Mrs. Kerridge looked at her from time to time and smiled.

Jane had sung "The Lane where the violets nestle" to a welcome as cordial here as across the Thames, and for the song she disliked she had submitted one of the two she had lately learned, with a result that appeared to augur well for its place in her repertory. It was elegantly named "A Biscuit and a little piece of Cheese," and gave Jane scope for evincing a sense of humour that must have had the charm of the unexpected for any one who was acquainted with the singer. The song caught on, in the slang of the moment, and Jane was filled with the pride of possession.

"I've got the entire rights of it," she said to Mrs. Kerridge, with a proprietary and a professional air that sat upon her somewhat comically. She had heard Miss Chingford speak so of a successful song,

and knowing herself to be a babe was moved in the moment of her elation to hint at a shrewdness she was far from having. But she became her ingenuous self again at once, and spoke with solicitude of the composer.

"Oh," she said, "it'd be nice to bring him luck, would n't it? Some singers make the names of the authors. It puts 'Sung with Immense Success'" (Jane's tone expressed capitals!) "'by So and So' on the cover — you know. I don't believe any of his songs have been published yet. It'd be nice if they got published through me."

"Ah, I 'd like to 'ear 'em on the organs," said Mrs. Kerridge.

"P'r'aps it'll even come to that," said Jane.

Mrs. Kerridge declared that she would n't be surprised. She returned to the subject of the singer.

She had much to say. She had kept her ears open, and had heard more than one gratifying remark about Miss Tandem's performance. These she retailed with unction.

The Edgware Music Hall was larger than the Camberwell. Jane remembered a misgiving as to her ability to fill it and gave voice to the doubt.

"Could you hear me?" she asked anxiously.

"Every word where I was."

"I'm glad," said Jane. "Oh, I'm glad."

Happiness illumined her.

"And they sang your chorus a masterpiece," said Mrs. Kerridge. "There was a lady sitting near me

as fairly got the tune in her 'ead. She was 'ummin' it when we came out."

They reached home.

"I 'm a good bit happier than I was this time last week," said Jane, at the turn of the stairs.

Mrs. Kerridge, one foot in her own room and one on the threshold, recapitulated Jane's grounds for such happiness.

"And what did I tell you?" she asked in fine.

After this the weeks began to pass quickly, and Jane to be happy as in the early days at Camberwell. Everything reminded her of that time. She made new friends in her profession, and thought of the friends she called old. When she was happiest she thought of Michael, and sometimes happiness sent her thoughts to Curley. At times she paused to sigh. That was when Michael seemed increasingly distant, and when she recognized that the recollection of her last meeting with him was losing something of its clearness. He had not written again. No one talked of him, for no one knew him. Even at the little hall across the river he had scarcely had an individuality. He was an instrument in the orchestra, no more; and at that a negligible quantity. Jane's first name for him — the drum — spoke to his unimportance.

But Curley was here in London. She had met him, might meet him again, and more than once she heard his name. Sometimes, for strange reasons, she spoke it herself, asking her fellow artists if they knew him.

Thus she showed herself that she was no longer afraid of him.

Mr. Paton told her of offers in many directions. When she found herself appearing twice in the same night, she knew her star to be rising, indeed.

But the light of its rising showed pitfalls in her path. Hitherto a shout of "Brayvo Jenny!" from the back of the hall or the top of it, and an occasional flower taken from a coat and flung from a box or a stall, had represented the utmost expression of individual appreciation that ever reached her; but presently her admirers sought means more direct to convey their sentiments. Mrs. Kerridge had warned her at a time when the voice of one that warned was as the voice of one that mocked. Jane remembered her own suggestion of "West End Halls," and crumpled up the letter that had been handed to her.

Six months went by: Jane's card was in the Entr'-Acte; a year: she was prosperous, recorded her existence in the Era, and had thanked Somebody "Esquire" for an offer for pantomime — rejected.

The "Lane" was published and selling. Jane's picture graced the cover. Organs ground out the air, children danced to it in the street. Then Jane knew fame.

She was prosperous. Happy? Knew more of life, and cried sometimes for her mother. Her heart was empty — and love was offered to her. Letters came often now, flowers, presents. Jane's expression became apprehensive.

"Will it be like this always?" she said to Nelly Chingford.

"You want a brother or some one to look after you," said Miss Chingford, smiling at her seriousness.

"I've no one," said Jane.

Miss Chingford mused.

"You'd be better married," she said; "then there'd be somebody to see that they let you alone." She looked at the note and the little diamond brooch which were the cause of Jane's immediate disquietude. Jane thought of the new struggle that had come into her life. She had but changed one anxiety for another. It was easy enough to refuse invitations to supper and to submit to being thought a Little Silly for her scruples. As yet the amusements of her companions alarmed her more than they attracted her. She was in their world and not of it, and a girl or two eyed her askance. But laxity was in the air. Nothing mattered. Would she always be able to fight while her empty heart cried out for love?

Miss Chingford looked up, and said some people would n't call these things troubles. Diamonds! Well, there, it was give and take, and not unfair, if you came to think. But (enigmatically) it was "all according" and Jane was "different."

"And whatever you took to the halls for, dear, with your pretty innocent face, I can't think. They're bound to love you — men are — it's the brooch now — ten pounds, I dare say, he paid for that. But it means this, you know, and you could have it any day of your life, I can see."

Miss Chingford waved her hand comprehensively. She wore an elaborate tea-gown and the chairs in her drawing-room were covered with crimson plush. The piano was black and gold and had medallions of porcelain let into the woodwork of the case.

"You see, Charlie's very wealthy," she in parenthesis and explanation; "he'd marry me to-morrow, as he's told me times and times, if he was free, but — well, there you are, and it was a little diamond lizard with a ruby head, much about the size of your brooch, that opened my eyes (some years ago, mind), and I was an orphan, too."

The expression of Jane changed from apprehension to fear. Miss Chingford caught her by the elbows and shook her affectionately.

"You little trembling mouse," she cried, "I've scarcely patience with you. Why do you come to me and let me say such things to you? It's a lie if I tell you I'm never sorry. There's days — evenings generally, you know, twilights — when I'd give something to have my life over again. I'm not talking of now particularly. I'm very fond of Charlie, and he's better than some, but it's getting off the straight that does for you. I think I'm a religious woman — somewhere deep down and behind what I do (my God when I think of my songs!) and I believe in souls."

"Then, why —" Jane began.

"We'll leave my case out of it, I think," said Nelly grimly. "My bed's made, anyway, but you have got the making of yours."

CHAPTER XV

CURLEY MERINO, it may be guessed, was not troubled with any very deep feelings, and he had long since got over his fleeting passion for Jane. Circumstances had separated him from the object of his desire at the critical time, and other interests had soon absorbed him. But with Curley, in the words of Madame Merino, you never knew where you were, and to prophesy that what had been in his mind would never return to it would have been vain, indeed, and a wasting of words.

Jane, to sum up, was not thrown in his way; that was all.

The plans for his future were engrossing enough to distract his attention at first. Luck was with him, and he made the acquaintance of Messrs. Camden and Carson, who dropped in at the Mocha one night, on their way home from the Aquarium at Westminster where they were fulfilling a protracted engagement. A comment upon Curley's share in the performance of the Merino Family led to an interchange of opinions, in the course of which Curley spoke of his dissatisfaction with his present position. He had seen Camden and Carson perform more than once, and he knew their merits as he knew his own. They were young men, albeit his seniors by some years, and Curley believed in youth. Standing at the bar

with them, he saw their reflection and his own in a mirror.

The uniformity of the trio struck him. In truth, it was noteworthy. In height and build the three were matched. They had the same look of lithe limbs and suppleness of joint.

Curley nodded at the three reflections, raising his glass. He spoke of his determination to seek a new berth for himself. The proposal of one of his companions that he should join them was lightly made.

Curley took up the suggestion and played with it, turning it this way and that as a kitten a cork. Then like a ball the idea was tossed from one to another of the three while glasses were emptied and filled. It dropped and lay still for a space, to be thrown in the air and caught neatly and thrown once again, before it dropped down at the parting.

Camden and Carson, however, talked as they went home.

Curley on his own account proceeded to the Aquarium the next day, and regarded their performance critically. To just such artists would he wish to ally himself, and without any undue vanity he thought that they would find him an acquisition of value, if they could be induced to think seriously of taking him into partnership. He did not make his presence known to them, but went his way.

Now Camden and Carson continued to talk, and gradually the idea which had been mooted in all playfulness began to be considered in earnest. They were

ambitious, and had discernment enough to see that Curley, who was wasted where he was, would increase the strength of their own "show." Unknown to him, they visited the Mocha again. Thus did Curley on the one hand, and Camden and Carson on the other, pursue the same course.

Still neither took any definite step.

A week passed, and then another. The Merinos finished their engagements at "Rawlinses" and the Mocha and were appearing at Hammersmith. Curley, hankering after the fleshpots of Egypt, — Leicester Square, Piccadilly Circus, the Strand, — eyed the distant Broadway with disdain. The wish to perform to a greater world became every day more insistent, and the meeting with Camden and Carson, by its hint of possible results, heightened a restlessness that expressed itself in many ways.

In so far as it was in his nature to disturb himself, Curley chafed. The knowledge that the remedy lay probably with himself caused him sometimes to set his teeth. For, strange as it may seem, he could not wholly shake off a sense of what he owed to his family. That he was bound by no articles of apprenticeship, or other bond, spoke either to the unbusinesslike temperament of Merino or to a faith on his part in family ties. Curley, then, cursed his scruples for their very unexpectedness, and let day after day go by without taking any active measures to assert his freedom. He waited, in truth, like Mr. Micawber, for something to turn up, and a definite offer from Cam-

den and Carson was the form he hoped most such up-turning would take. He watched for a letter or a visit, divining that they had gauged his value and were not impossibly considering the matter. But they also were waiting.

Affairs were standing thus when a trifling domestic revelation gave Curley the excuse he needed for severing his connection with the Family. It came indirectly of his mother's uneasiness about him, and directly of Lena's recollection of a few incautious words let fall in her hearing.

Madame Merino was not a woman to anticipate evil. Life had not dealt her any heavy blows or otherwise given her cause for adopting an attitude of apprehension. She had lived her forty years complacently, doing her duties cheerfully, and letting the future take care of itself. Merino was a good husband, and her children, save one who had died in infancy, were with her. But of late an anxiety that was prospective if not actual had begun to cast a shadow over her serenity. Watching Curley (as the result of the momentary misgiving that had jerked from her lips one evening a word of warning), she fancied a slight change in him. A recurrence of the flush on his cheeks and the sparkle in his eyes renewed almost immediately the first fear that had come into her haphazard mind so strangely. But watching more closely, she had soon found other cause for anxiety. She looked, and she saw her son preoccupied, restless, restive. He had been amenable, he was im-

patient of control. He had been contented, he showed himself contemptuous of his surroundings. He had accepted her husband's views, he had views of his own.

Presently he talked vaguely of the future; soon in his discussions of prospects and plans, dissociating himself from the rest, he hinted at potential independence.

Madame Merino, suspecting the forces that were at work in him, and, for reasons of her own, fearing an encounter between him and Monze, did all in her power to pacify him. There came a day, however, when of set purpose she spoke of a tour Monze projected.

"You 'll like that," she said tentatively.

"I might n't and again I might," he said. "You never know. And perhaps it won't concern me. Who can tell? Perhaps and perhaps not. It 's a month off, anyway."

She thought to "have it out" with him and faced him.

"What d' y' mean?" she asked. — "'Perhaps and perhaps not'; what d' y' mean by it, Curley?"

But Curley closed one eye.

"You 're all the while half-saying things," said his mother petulantly. "I don't know what 's coming to you. Ain't we good enough for y', all of a sudden?"

Lena was by, and pricked up her ears as once before. Madame Merino observed her alertness and, as then, bade her be occupied with her own affairs.

"And why don't y' speak out?" she added to Curley.

"I shall when the time comes," he answered lightly, and closed the subject by taking his hat from a peg and departing.

Madame Merino fell into silence, but Lena, with the air of a woman of the world, must needs discourse upon the situation at length. Tying the bit of rose-coloured ribbon that decorated the end of her meagre pigtail, she expressed certain middle-aged sentiments with complacent assurance. She hoped nothing was coming to her brother, and speculated as to whether anything "laid" upon his mind. She instanced the things she did n't "like to see" — an increasing fondness for the bar, a tendency to stop out at night. Such things "had n't ought" to be, and this or that was to be hoped or feared. She waxed monumental at the sound of her own voice, and finding herself uninterrupted supposed herself encouraged. Now it was the ambition of this somewhat precocious young person to be treated as grown up, and to be included in discussions from which she and Fritz were habitually shut out on the score of their youth. Wishing to be considered mature, she pretended often to a comprehension that was in reality the reverse of complete. A parrot-like repetition of words or phrases she had heard, was one of the methods she employed to impress those by whom she wished to be appreciated. She resorted to it now.

"It 'd be a pity if he did n't go on satisfactory,"

she said, "though of course, with every one taking a fancy to him like they do, it 's difficult for him to refuse a drink here and there, and I don't blame him, but of course with his fam'ly hist'ry he ought to be careful, had n't he?"

Family history! Madame Merino, who had not been attending, became alive to the things of the moment, at once, — but, like one waking from slumber and unable to collect the faculties immediately, she blundered in her speech.

"Family history!" she cried. "What are you talking about! What do you know of it? You never saw his father."

She broke off, but the thing was spoken. Even then her admission might have escaped notice but for her obvious haste to cover it. Lena looked at her with surprise as she floundered for a moment in words. Lena herself had attached no specific significance to the term she had used. The words were her mother's, and sounded well, whatever they meant, but now the girl saw that their actual import must have escaped her. They had the power, it seemed, of throwing her mother into confusion; they must be remarkable, indeed. Lena promised herself to remember them and the circumstances that attended their utterance.

Madame Merino recovered herself.

"You do aggravate me so, Lena, with your tongue," she said. "I declare I don't know what I 'm saying. Wag, wag, wag, it 's enough to drive one silly.

Family history! What did you mean? We're all strong enough, thank God. What made y' say it, child, eh?"

"It was you said it," said Lena.

"Me? I never—"

"Yes, you did. It was that night after Curley'd had the row with that Seaward feller and they was all wanting to drink with him, you spoke to father, and I remember as well as well; you said it was his family 'ist'ry you was thinking about."

"Did I? Well, there, I 'd forgotten. Perhaps I did. I wonder why."

But Lena was very sharp, a circumstance which her mother would have done well to consider.

"I expect I was anxious about him or something," Madame Merino added. "I should be about any of y', if there were too many wanting to treat y'. That's what mothers are. You need n't worry y'r father, see."

Lena shook her head.

"Father hardly touches a drop, does he?" she said, and found further cause for wonder in that so simple a remark should revive her mother's irritation.

"You do take one up so," Madame Merino said, angrily, "making a song out of every little thing. Go and fetch them stockings I gave y' to darn, and let's hear the end of it, for goodness' sake."

Lena went away as she was bidden, and in time Madame Merino regained her equanimity. Her quills were never aspike for long, but subsided to their

usual sleekness as easily as they bristled, and nearly as fast. She thought little more of the matter. But Lena thought of it a good deal, puzzling and puzzled.

Curley, it happened, on the next day, had an altercation with Monze, in the course of which such terms were used by the elder as "Are you going to do what I tell you?" and "Am I master or am I not?" But though Madame trembled for the issue, the affair, for the time, closed amicably. Curley never sulked; but the engagement at the Broadway having finished the night before, and nearly a week elapsing before the troupe were due at the Hoxton for their next, he felt that he had lost a favourable opportunity of making the break he contemplated, and something like a frown was to be seen on his forehead for the rest of the morning.

It was now, however, that Lena put in her oar. Admiring her brother as she did from a distance, and deeming the moment auspicious for an attempt to establish herself in his good graces, she contrived to convey to him that she at least had been of opinion with him in the recent question at variance. A judicious administration of flattery soon induced the magnificent Curley to unbend, and to her pride she found him conversing with her.

"He 's very hasty, Monze is," she said reflectively, "and he don't seem to remember that we ain't children all our lives — and mother, she 's just the same. Why, yesterday . . ." and then came the story of Madame Merino and the words Family History.

It was Curley now who pricked up his ears. He questioned Lena in and out, thinking busily the while.

Many little incidents, barely noted at the time of their occurrence, recurred to him ; many an allusion and a look — things that had happened in his childhood ; things he had forgotten now. The very difference between him and the others.

"She said it to father?"

"Yes."

Monze, of course, knew. Nor had there, perhaps, been any deceiving. A taking for granted had been suffered to be, and the rest was automatic. Indeed, had Curley himself not helped by his assumption, it was possible that his eyes would never have been bandaged (these things counted for little in the walk of life trodden by Monze and the Family). H'm, thought Curley, and H'm. A gap of three years separated him from the next born. Monze had married his mother.

He gave a little laugh.

"Why, it's as plain as the nose on your face," he said, aloud.

"What is?" asked Lena with eagerness.

He would not tell her, and went his way whistling.

As to that which his mother had meant by his "family history," he could not do more than conjecture, nor had he indeed much concern. The discovery gave him his freedom, for by a reasoning sufficiently strange he held himself quit of all obligations to Monze, and he went to seek Camden and Carson.

CHAPTER XVI

THE rupture itself followed quickly. Curley came back from his errand in high feather. He was on good terms with himself and the world, and he would have wished his secession to be effected peaceably. But this he was sure might not be.

Nor was it. Curley waited till the next day and spoke boldly. The amiable head of the troupe broke into choler at once. He made use of a full and a forcible vocabulary, and refused to let Curley go. He might have been Pharaoh, and Curley the Israelites, and his tone, to be just, was incensive. An answering wrath kindled quickly in Curley. Let? he asked, Let? What was that? He had an offer and meant to accept it. Madame Merino, torn in two ways, knit her brows. Curley, her firstborn and beautiful, was worth better things than a life in the outlying halls. Monze was of husbands the kindest and best, and had loved her for near twenty years.

Her love for her husband, her love for her son, and something of humanity and of real emotion underlying all the coarse and vulgar things that were said in the scene that ensued, redeemed it from pure ugliness. Curley even was not without heart of a sort. He cared for his mother and the man he had always called father, and he cared in a fashion for Perky and

Lena and Fritz. But his interests and his affection colliding, it was plain which must go to the wall. He slashed right and left in his anger. The troupe was seedy and shoddy and fit for the streets or a fair. You would see better stuff in a booth. He, for his part, was ashamed to be seen in it, and not for much longer, and so on . . .

Monze on his side said the cub's head was turned, and that it was a pity the police had interfered upon an occasion which all might remember, to prevent his getting the thrashing he deserved.

Madame Merino, albeit atremble and on the verge of tears, could not hear the word Cub in silence. "A good word enough," shouted Monze in retort, and broke off with a look that seemed to speak of things he might add if he chose. But Curley laughed loud — to be told with an oath he should laugh very soon on the other side of his face, whatever a prophecy so threatening might signify.

"Who's going to make me?" cried Curley.

Madame Merino veered like a vane in a changing wind.

Curley was getting too big for his boots, she avowed, and how dared he speak so to his father!

"Father?" said Curley, "Father? Do you suppose I don't know? I'm no fool."

Monze and his wife exchanged looks. The one look said, "I never told him"; the other, "Nor I"; and both of them, "How does he know it?"

Curley in turn eyed his mother and Monze and

thought he had the advantage (though Heaven knew why!), and thinking so laughed once again.

"Nobody told me," he said. "I just knew for myself. I'd only to open my eyes. Look at the difference between me and the rest. Father? You began to be Father at Perky — a year or two later; mind y', I don't blame anybody." (Curley could recover his temper as quickly as his mother, and could be as generous and indulgent!) "Nor yet I don't care. But when it came to Monze saying I can't do as I like, I say he's no claim on me."

Merino, however, had something to say after that, and Madame a word or two. The war seemed beginning — not over. Voices were loud in abusings that need not be chronicled. Curley, his generosity and forbearingness thrown, so to speak, in his face, lashed out into anger at once. He set his teeth. Monze said, "It's that, is it?" Curley came nearer; then Monze.

Said Madame Merino, "For God's sake!"

There was a holding of the breath and a deadly look in the eye. Curley's fist doubled.

"No nonsense!" said Monze. His hand on Curley's arm sent the hand of Curley, unfolding, to Merino's collar. For the space of the shutting and the opening of an eye neither stirred or spoke. The wife and mother grew pale to the lips as the husband and the son stood up to each other in ominous stillness.

"Monze," she breathed, scarce speaking; "Monze."

He loosened his hold; Curley his; then Merino said, "Go"; and that was the going of Curley.

They heard him leave the house whistling. His steps rang on the pavement outside, and seemed by their buoyancy to insist upon his indifference. Madame Merino went to the window and watched him out of sight. His aspect was unruffled. He did not turn. She looked up at the sky. It was low and grey. The room appeared to her cheerless and desolate when she turned back to it.

"Where's Curley?" said Lena at tea-time that day.

Silence was her answer. Madame Merino's eyelids were pink, and the tea splashed on to the table as she poured with dimmed aim. She drew her hand across her eyes and poured straight. Monze looked grim; Lena a thousand questions. She repeated "Where's Curley?"

"Eat ch' tea," said her mother shortly.

Perky looked up from "The Boys of London," one finger on a line that ran thus: *Throwing back her head with a gesture at once haughty and defiant, the proud girl turned to face the Earl.* There was that in the air to arrest the attention, or his had not wandered at a juncture so thrilling. He saw that his mother had been crying; that his father was out of sorts, and that Lena was agog with curiosity. Fritz was occupied with a large slice of bread and jam, but his eyes grew round like Lena's.

Curley was often absent from meals. What of it?

Perky was sorry his mother had been crying. Lena and Fritz would do no good by staring. He returned to his paper to learn how the Proud Girl received her Betrayer, but the intangible disquietude followed him. Things were not as usual. Madame Merino was preoccupied. She crumbled her bread, and conveyed it in fragments to her mouth, forgetting to butter it. She seemed to listen for sounds, and glanced more than once at the door. Monze moved impatiently and frowned, Perky even (reading *Unhand me, or by Heaven . . .* and *Noble Preserver, behold in me your long-lost sister*, and the like) knew how the restless Lena's eye sought his. Monze pushed away his cup when he had finished.

"No good you watching the door," he said to his wife. "He won't come back, if I know him — unless it's to fetch his things." He felt for his pipe and added, "Not him!"

"Curley?" said Lena, "Curley?"

"Yes, Miss Inquisitive, Curley, if you want to know. Now you've got it, see. You've been agape long enough."

It was three were agape after that. Perky dropped his paper. The Proud Girl and the Earl and the Noble Preserver took their true value at once and lay forgotten under the table, till Madame Merino found them in "tidying up," and said "Here, 'Boys of London.' Some rubbish of yours, Perky." Fritz paused in munching. Lena's eyebrows went up half an inch.

"Curley gone? Gone where?" she asked; and then questions tripped themselves up on her tongue. Perky put a few, and Fritz.

Monze explained briefly that Curley was going to better himself and that the Family henceforth numbered one less. He alluded indefinitely to the alterations that would have to be made in the performance, and in speaking of the delinquent displayed on the whole a remarkable moderation. Madame Merino looked at him gratefully.

"But that's Monze," she said to herself. "That's my Monze, and the kindest heart in the profession." Her eyes filled with tears.

"Curley's an ungrateful beast," she thought presently. "He'll come to repent it, and serve him right. Treated as Monze treated him from the first — never a bit of difference made 'twixt one and another unless to make more of him, p'r'aps, than the rest, and then to turn on the hand that befriended him . . ."

She broke off to think of her early misfortune. "Bred in the bone, he's the son of his father," she took up her plaint. "How did his father use me? . . . If I'd cared . . . and I did n't, thank God! . . . and then there was Monze and never a word in my teeth. But Curley to act so! It's shame to me now. 'Claim'! 'Claim'! such a word! Knock me down with a feather you could when he said it. And him bold as brass to stand up to his father (as he'd thought and believed him). Good Lord!"

Righteous anger possessed her. The boy should be put from her heart. He was "selfish, worthless, impudent," a "young vagabond," a "Cub" (yes, Monze was right and "Cub" was good enough) and much else that was damnable. But in the end, as at the beginning, he was her son — her very own for the story of him.

Her heart was not to be steeled against him. The sight of a scarf of his that hung on a hook on the door told her that he was Curley, the prettiest lad in all England. Where would you see such another? She thought of his smile, of his laugh, and his beautiful shape; of her pride in him; of his childhood and boyhood, and now his ambition, guessing at it. Monze must not blame him, nor she. What was, had to be. Sooner or later, had she not felt it, known it? — he had been bound to go. Young birds spread their wings. The manner only of his action was culpable, and this, perhaps, had been forced upon him by the circumstances of the moment. Monze after all had said Go, and Curley, perhaps, would have waited.

As during the battle she veered, so veered she now. Monze must be won. He was quick to anger, but not unreasonable. He had been twenty himself. He would see.

Lena and Fritz made a babel. Even the quiet Perky talked glibly. Consternation was general.

Monze rose to go with a "Sh, I can't hear myself speak," and Madame Merino did what she had not

done for years; she followed him to the passage to help him on with his coat and to kiss him.

"Why — old woman!" he said.

"You won't hate him?"

"I've a thing or two to forget."

"So have I," she said quickly.

"He's young," said Monze.

"Ah, that's it, that's it."

She clutched at the straw. But she was not to drown, and blessed Monze for it.

"I think of how I've loved that boy," she said, "and him to serve you so. I remember when he was a baby the fancy you took to him. It was that first made me look at you to love you. I'd seen you often enough on the bar, and I'd thought to myself you were pretty enough for a woman to love you, but never did I think of you twice till the day I saw you and the boy. He stretched out his arms to you (it seems just like yesterday) and you took him and danced him, and when he fell asleep you let him lie in the hollow of your arm that I'd only thought of as muscle and sinew — the arm for the bar and trapeze. It was then I knew the heart of you, Monze; you've loved him, too."

"I'm not the only one maybe that he's made a fool of," said Monze.

Madame Merino perked up.

"Meaning me?" she said.

So near was her laughter to her tears, and hope leapt in her!

"Meaning you, and we shan't be the last. Meaning any that's silly enough to care for him."

"Which is saying he's Curley."

"No less."

"God bless you," said Madame Merino.

CHAPTER XVII

CURLEY, to be explicit, had not intended to break thus summarily with his family. He had thought to see out existing engagements — never, indeed, seriously believing that he could be free at shorter notice, and dimly cognizant of such potential impediments as injunctions to restrain (or whatever the law might call them) in the way of any other procedure. A month he had instanced to Camden and Carson as the soonest at which he could join them, and, their own arrangements making a change in their performance impossible for three fourths of that time, the date he suggested had seemed likely to suit them as himself.

His immediate freedom, however, was not to be regretted, and it was no affectation of light-heartedness that sent him whistling from the house. He went to his new friends.

The three drank success to their enterprise. Curley's spirits rose high and higher.

"Camden, Carson, Curley — the Three C's!" he said.

"Not so bad when you come to names," said Camden.

"We might do worse," said Carson.

"And not come to blows," said Curley under his breath.

The Three C's it was.

Then arrangements were discussed. Curley's story had to be heard once or twice more.

"Monze said 'Go,'" said Curley, "and I went. Lucky we were having a week off."

Then Curley (having by the suddenness of his departure but what he stood up in) made provision and shift for the night.

The next day he chose an hour at which he divined the troupe would be rehearsing in their curtailed number and went home for his "things," first, however, sounding his conjecture by sending a child on to find out if the coast were clear. This proved to be the case, and he went to the house, where he proceeded to pack his clothes at leisure, humming the while. The landlady, however, came up of curiosity to deliver herself of "Not at the 'all?" and was told lightly Not — as she saw for herself. She became abristle with curiosity thereupon. Something had happened, and she had not heard of it.

"Well, I never!" she said. "You're not going away!"

"Looks like it," said Curley, and shouldered his bag.

"But Mr. and Madame and the Family —"

Curley chose to misunderstand.

"We ain't shooting the moon, you know."

("Just as if . . . and the very idea!" as she explained to his mother afterwards, "but he will have his joke!")

She tried coaxing.

"You might tell me," she said.

"And again I might not," said Curley.

"Such an old friend . . . my lodgings on and off these two years, and not to tell me! You would not serve me so."

Curley said "Mind!"—the bag near her head as he passed her. At the door he turned to add: "Look out for The Three C's."

"Whatever's he mean!" she said in protest.

Curley laughed. ("Merry as a skylark," she described him later.)

"And is that all?" she asked him.

"That's all," said Curley—"except p'r'aps goodbye to yourself and love to mother and the kids."

He went his way whistling as before and took a hansom.

It was ten days after this that there occurred the meeting with Jane, which ended in her forgiving him, as we know. This meeting he took lightly enough at the time. But he thought of her lips afterwards, and was restless for an evening. For Curley, however, there were other girls in London. Three days passed. He thought himself cured. He worked hard with his partners; rehearsals were then in full swing, and satisfactory arrangements in progress.

A fortnight after the conclusion of the engagement of Camden and Carson at the Aquarium, The Three C's opened their campaign at the Oxford and scored a signal success.

Monze read of it in the "Era" that week, Madame having read. What he should say was the test of his nature. She waited, and Monze said, "Well done." Madame Merino repeated his words, but she applied them to him and not Curley. She was as proud a wife that day as she was a proud mother.

She delivered a lecture to Perky and Lena and Fritz.

"You value y' father," she said. "There never was one like him, and there'll never be another. He's just a masterpiece, that's what he is — a perfect masterpiece."

They assented in their various ways, and wondered what Monze had done.

Curley now found himself prosperous. Money jingled in his pockets. He lived well and thought little. He had not a questioning mind. But he was generous, and when Monze came to see him he received him with cordiality and allowed bygones to be bygones. So ready was he to forgive and forget! (Poor Curley of the beautiful form and the hollow heart!) To his mother also he suffered himself to be reconciled — never really, as he explained to her, having borne her any ill-will.

"Ill-will," said Madame, "ill-will? And what for, pray? I should think not, indeed."

"I say I have n't," said Curley.

He must have been laughing, after all.

"Some one 'll suffer by you," she said, shaking her head.

But it was good to have him with her at any price, and she forbore to reproach him. Lena and Fritz hung about him, till he said, That would do.

Perky walked home with him. Curley talked of himself. He was on good terms with the universe.

"You've gone up one," he said, at last, "have n't you?"

Perky admitted that the matter could be viewed in that light. He did not enlarge, however, upon the advancement he was enjoying through the secession of his brother. He preferred to talk of Curley. Nor was Curley loth to return to himself.

"You must come up and see us one night," he said.

"Yes," answered Perky, "I mean to. But it can't be this week."

The Family were performing in East London then.

"Well, when you can. And bring the mother and Monze."

Curley suggested a drink. A house of public entertainment was at hand.

"No? Then I will. So long. And be good!"

He turned in at the swing-doors with a nod and the beguiling smile that Perky knew so well.

In due course the Merinos visited the Oxford and saw the performance of The Three C's.

Madame Merino looked excited as a child. A running stream of intelligent technical appreciation flowed from Lena's lips as she watched the trio.

"That youngest one's my stepson," Monze confided to a neighbour.

Curley introduced him to his partners later and compliments were exchanged.

"You trained him?" said Camden.

"Well, yes."

"He's a credit to you."

To Madame Merino the pair were presented.

"His looks from his mother," said Carson gallantly at the table in the Soho restaurant to which the party repaired for supper.

"Go on, Mr. Carson," said Madame Merino, all smiles and brown velvet. But she frowned when she saw Curley's glass brimming.

"You might keep an eye on him now and again," she said, in a burst of confidence born of her anxiety and the expanding influence of supper. "I've just one fear about Curley, and that's—"

She nodded, and Mr. Carson followed her glance.

"Well, p'r'aps two fears I have," she said reflectively—"two, maybe three. But that's one."

She did not despond, however. The occasion was for rejoicing.

"As his mother you'll guess I'm proud of him," she said, remembering this.

Lena was saying to Curley:—

"I wish I was you."

Perky looked pleased when Curley addressed him, and Fritz devoured his three hosts with round eyes.

Monze was anecdotal and told stories of his stepson's sharpness. The recent rancours were forgotten.

It was Curley's evening, as an evening that we remember had been the evening of Jane.

The sun the moon and the eleven stars bowed down as in Joseph's dream. Curley, too, had dreamed once.

Thus did Fortune smile on Curley at the same time that she smiled upon Jane. For each did her smile bid fair to be permanent. Jane in a year established a very creditable position, and The Three C's a reputation that was notable. In this year it happened that Curley and Jane met but thrice. Each time Curley remembered her for a brief space and then forgot her. Three times did the seed (but it was the seed of some flower red as fire) spring up in the shallow ground and three times wither away, lacking deepness of earth. Jane, as we know, was not near, that was all, and of nearness came passion in Curley. The same town held them both. They followed different lines of the same profession. Their calling led them to like places. Sooner or later the paths must converge. Jane knew this vaguely, and put the thought from her. Her subconsciousness held it as wax an impression. Curley, not thinking of it, may have known it too. His attitude at least was consistent with waiting.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE brooch was sent back, but reappeared the next day. The stage doorkeeper gave it to Jane, and saw her expression of dismay. He winked at a friend.

Jane was frightened — pestered with offers of love, lonely and longing to be loved. Michael would have been her refuge at such a time, but Michael was represented by silence. He had forgotten her, she told herself. She still lodged with Mrs. Kerridge, but various improvements had taken place in her quarters. The room next to hers having become vacant upon the moving of the embroidresses to Dalston, Jane had taken it, and was furnishing it as a sitting-room by degrees and as her means permitted. Both rooms had been papered and painted. The piano Jane longed for had been hired. She bought some chintz and made curtains. With her own nimble fingers, moreover, she covered the chairs her mother had left her, and by the judicious expenditure of a few pounds she made herself a home in which she was not ashamed to receive her friends. Here Nelly Chingford came to see her, and others — Birdies, Gracies, Mahrees. She had a good many photographs now — some of herself, some of her acquaintances and signed. The inscriptions were significant. Lilla (at, say, thirty-five) was "Your loving little Friend" upon one; the counterfeit presentment of a young person in tights

was modestly endorsed, "Boisie Bredalbane (Queen of Song)"; and below a group of coryphées was written, "To dear Jenny from Six Lady Friends: Ruth Rawson, Pixie Westmorland, Laura Vane, Emmeline Mason, Cora Flood, and Georgina Jackson."

Of such was the Kingdom of Bohemia.

Jane got "notices" now, and pasted them into a book. To this, when she was depressed, she went for comfort, and read that she was a bright little Serio, that she was Pretty Jenny Tandem and had a Flute-like Voice; that she had given "The Lane where the violets nestle" with the Accustomed Charm; that a Very Promising Little Singer had appeared in the person of Miss Tandem; that Miss Tandem was The Popular Favourite; that she was Jenny of the Sea-blue Eyes; that she was Jenny of the Dainty Ankles; that Silk Stockings Became them (a pink notice this); that she was Our Jenny; that she took the Cracknell; and much else expressed in like impersonal, witty, and dignified manner.

Jane did not yet, except where her engagements made the extravagance necessary, "ride in her bro'ham," as Mrs. Kerridge had tentatively prophesied, but the day had come, none the less, when she found herself able to indulge her wish to give, and the wardrobe of her friend and landlady received many a little addition and alteration at her affectionate hands. The promised mantle marked the day when Jane found her salary more than she "knew what to do with"; but her taste had changed with the

year of wider experiences and bronze beads had lost their allurement. Mrs. Kerridge was aided in choosing black silk.

Jane spoke, too, a shade more correctly. When she thought about it she picked her words — if, as I fear, she minced them a little, and used the bastard English of the world in which she moved; but on the whole her accent and mode of expressing herself were improved and improving. She sang better, giving fuller value to her notes and her syllables. Elementary Jane was a year older.

With increased means she read more. She had not wholly abandoned the penny novelette, but thence she was looking upwards. She said of certain books, that they were very nice. On her table lay "East Lynne," for which she reserved superlatives, and Hawthorne's "Scarlet Letter," which she had bought second-hand, attracted by the title, and termed "very nice," though the bit of worsted that formed her book-marker remained stationary in the second chapter. For newspapers there were the "Era" and the "Entr'Acte." Governments might come and go, wars threaten, empires fall, Jane read Music Hall Intelligence, Artist's Wants, and all the Cards — the last with intense enjoyment, for her own was amongst them. It recorded two halls, sometimes three. Happy Miss Tandem! It was a strange world, this world of hers, judged by the Cards. Therein each blew his own trumpet, and sturdy the blast! Stout lungs and enduring to such blowings as these! The wall for

shyness and modesty! Even humble, retiring Jane was The Charming Ingénue. Nelly Chingford declared herself The Joy of London; Alfie Le Roy (of whom mention has been made and now an acquaintance of Jane's) was The Beautiful Serio, and Managers were Respectfully begged to beware of Colourable Imitations. Also (fancy having free play) they were to see that they got Her; and the card ended enigmatically with something about striking only on the Box. As lively a wit characterized a dozen others. Not a few contained personal and intimate messages; An Eccentric Comedian and Female Personator thanked Some One Esquire for kind enquiries after the health of his wife and the little one. A Burlesque Actress and Dancer enumerated her triumphs, and bore no malice towards that young lady (so-called) who had tried (unsuccessfully) to spoil her stay in Bradford. The Sisters Soda wanted it known that they had concluded a prosperous and happy continental tour (with return visits to Paris, Brussels, and Vienna), and wished to acknowledge the great benefit to be gained from the use of Jones's Poudre de Neige in preference to other face powders. A Comedy Vocalist (to be a Comedy Vocalist, think of it!), The Biggest Draw ever known at Highbury and North Kensington, was Disengaged. A few ladies were Resting.

Jane, troubled by the persistent brooch, went to her praise-book for solace. Surely some day there

would be offered to her a love that would be welcome and honest. There were times when she conceived love her right; there were others when, looking round and seeing sorrow and sickness and death in the world, she felt that love was a thing that not many were granted, and so a priceless concession. To not many was given the joy of a love that was lawful. All round her she saw people straining at happiness each in his way, and Jane could have wept for them all. She heard of love and love and love, thought of it, sang of it — saw it and it was base. But love of no sort had gripped her as yet.

One letter broaching marriage had reached her. "Dear Miss" (its beginning) did not strike her as ludicrous, nor even its matter and manner as grotesque. The writer admired her "refined style," was a licensed victualler (and frank — to intimate detail), spoke of a corner house in a busy thoroughfare and doing so many casks weekly, thought he could make her happy, and desired her acquaintance. A postscript added "View: Matrimony. Intentions strictly honourable." But Jane shook her head as she read. Her publican in his frankness had mentioned his age. To Jane forty-five was as threescore and ten. She wrote back: ("Dear Sir" her beginning) and said like a child: "Thank you very much for your kind letter," but proceeded to declare that she had no thought of changing her lot.

"Dear Miss," came the answer, "your favour to hand. No offence meant and none, I trust, taken. If

you 'll pardon me saying so you might do worse than consider my proposal. I am of a loving and affectionate disposition and feel sure we should have suited each other. I may mention I own house-property in Brixton and Kennington, and am a member of the Church of England. Think it over once again and Oblige."

Jane thought it over, was shy, could not make up her mind to see him, and wrote as before. She was relieved and remorseful when his third letter announced the relinquishment of his suit.

Her other admirers did not hint at marriage. Jane neither drew herself up to her full height nor cried "Shame!" with flashing eyes. She behaved, indeed, very inferiorly to the Proud Girls of Perky Merino's fiction. She was alarmed rather than shocked, for Give and Take had it in Bohemia and the words of Nelly Chingford; and a dodging in her exits, to avoid, if it were possible, a meeting face to face with her lovers, was her course, rather than any attempt to confront them with her sense of their infamy.

In such encounters with them as were inevitable she was placed in no very serious straits, her childishness possibly protecting her, but the knowledge that her comings and goings were watched weighed upon her. She sent back the brooch with misgiving and impatience.

"Why can't he let me alone?" she asked of herself.

"Keep it, Unkind One," came word the next day,

"for a token, if you will, of the respect of your unhappy admirer."

Jane was touched in a moment.

"I don't like to," she wrote, "but I've sent it back twice. I'm sorry to seem unkind, I can't help it really. I'll keep it if you want me to as the gift of a friend."

The Brooch must have been a gentleman. He kept silence, though Jane wore his gift. She wore it with pride and reluctance, wondering whether "anything" would be thought. A girl or two of her acquaintance wore diamonds. But . . . "Oh, I can't wear it!" said Jane . . . And, "Oh, I must just to show I believe him."

"That's pretty," said Alfie Le Roy, patronizingly, one evening, "very pretty. The little red eyes I like —garnets, I suppose. I've got one something after the same style, only the diamonds are bigger in mine and I've an emerald in the tail. Mine's a lizard too, and rubies for eyes. Garnets look almost as well, I declare, and it's wonderful now what you can get in the way of paste."

She looked closer.

"Perhaps it's not paste," she said. "I'm sure I beg pardon."

She looked at Jane keenly.

Jane said, "I thought it'd go with this dress."

"Oh," said Miss Le Roy, "a lady with looks can always wear diamonds."

Jane blushed. She blushed also when she accounted

for her possession to Nelly Chingford. Miss Chingford checked her, kissing her hot cheek.

"You need n't tell me," she said. "I know you, Jenny, through and through. As if I should think . . . ! I know you and I hold it a privilege. There! That 's for yourself. And as to taking it, you did quite right."

"I don't see what else I could have done," Jane said, comforted.

"More don't I and his behaviour proves it. There 's good that one would n't dream of in some men."

"It's what people may think," Jane murmured.

"What does it matter what any one thinks if you know you 're right."

Jane acquiesced in the implied sentiment. She mentioned Miss Le Roy, all the same.

"A spiteful cat," said Miss Nell, "and no lady."

So Jane took heart of grace. She was sensitive to every current, and the words of others, their approval or their disapproval, their good-will or their antagonism, played upon her spirit as the atmosphere on mercury. She went home in a happier frame of mind.

She might dispose of her lovers, however, fill her life with "Eras" and "Entr'Actes," the gossip of her profession and laughter and tears as she would, she could not dispose of the craving that lies and that gnaws at the vitals of each for a space and the heart of the world for all time. She was thus in a state for the parson, who might have convinced her

of sin, and of sin in her calling; or, failing the message from heaven, for love. Love the deceiver, the false prophet, and the lying spirit, offered himself straightway. He came in fair guise — fair as love sung by Solomon.

"Life's what you make it," said Jane to herself, following out the reflections to which her talk with Nelly Chingford had given rise; and that night met Curley Merino.

CHAPTER XIX

JANE with a thumping heart watched The Three C's from the wings. In an interval between two engagements she was singing at one hall just then, — the Royal, in Holborn, — where, emerging from her dressing-room a few minutes since, she had found their performance in progress. She had not known that they were expected, and felt for a moment or two as if she must be dreaming. There was no doubt, however, that one was Curley in the flesh, and the others, she supposed, were Camden and Carson. And fine their performance! She saw its excellence, and knew why Curley had left the Family, and why The Three C's had a name that was daily ascendant. She forgot her misgivings as she watched the exquisite movements of the three young men. Each was supple and lithe as a panther, but Curley she chose as the pick of the three; met his eye as he looked off; and her own was charmed. It was then that her soul was cheated. The performance ended, Curley greeted her. Jane gave him her hand. She was ready to go on, but her turn was not yet. Miss Le Roy was before her.

Curley hurried away after Camden and Carson. He had to be rubbed down and to change. Jane did not know whether she was to see him again.

When she went on a quarter of an hour later,

Curley was in front. He stood at the end of the first row of the stalls. Jane saw him. By chance he wore the serge suit that she knew (she had beaten against it once as a bird against bars, torn at it, hated it!), and retrospectively she thought, without being conscious of thinking at all, that it became him marvellously well. She sang her best, and she saw that he applauded her. Her eyes sparkled as her dresser helped her to change. She strained towards the mirror.

"Keep still, there's a dear, or you won't 'ave a blessed hook straight. There's twice you've pulled this one out of my hand, an' you'd be glib enough to blame me if anything went wrong."

Jane laughed.

"Oh, I'm dreadful, I know. Now . . ."

"Mind!"

The woman still held her.

"Oh, please," said Jane, "be quick, be quick."

She was like a child kept back from its companions by a nurse.

The glass told a tale that was pleasant. She looked radiant as she sang her second song. Curley thought so, and travelled on quick recollection to Camberwell, to the lane between high hoardings and the hopes that had there been baffled.

Jane's fate closed in upon her.

She met it with a smile. She was very happy that night, and Curley was waiting for her.

"You did n't expect to see me, did you?"

"Here?"

(She had half expected that he would wait.)

"I mean our show."

"Oh, The Three C's. No, I had n't heard."

"No one had — till last night. It was settled right off. We had a date vacant, all of a sudden, through a disagreement."

They walked round to the front of the house, where Jane saw that new bills had been posted, and stood there on the broad pavement talking and looking each into the face of the other. A few people hung about the entrance of the music-hall. Now and then some one passed out or passed in. The night was light; blue above, where the lamps that dotted Holborn like pale flowers were repeated in paler stars. Jane looked up. Oh, the numberless stars! Oh, hearts that were beating and eyes that shone!

"Let me walk with you part of the way," said Curley.

Jane shook her head.

"Why? Tell me why."

She shook her head again.

"Once you walked with me," she said, "and I hated you afterwards."

"You don't hate me now."

"Perhaps not, but you know the old proverb about a burnt child."

"H'm!" said Curley.

"There's another that you've heard," said Jane, "and it's Once bit . . ."

"Ah, but The Biter Bit," said Curley, "I've heard of that, too. It happens sometimes. Maybe it's happened to me."

He smiled, putting a sigh into his smile and something that was plaintive into his expression.

"And you forgave me," he said.

"Well, you said so," said Jane.

"Come, there's no going back. You forgave me. Play fair."

Jane's smile answered his.

"I've got to forget anyway," she said.

"Another evening, then."

"I can't promise." She paused. "But — oh, some day, some day when —"

"Yes?"

"When I've learnt I can trust you."

They shook hands. He suffered her to go, and she went nursing joy in her heart. She did not know why hope dawned in her, nor did she ask herself why.

Mrs. Kerridge saw a change in her, and recalled a morning when Jane had kissed her because she was happy.

"There's good times an' bad times for all of us, ain't there? There's sorrer and gladness. And it's not you's to be pitied, it's plain. You've fell in with a bit o' luck, that's easy to see."

"Oh," said Jane, "what makes you think so?"

"What makes me think so? You to ask that. Bless the child. Look in the glass. There's one be'ind y'."

Jane turned to look, and saw herself rosy and beaming.

"You 'll tell me when the time comes," said Mrs. Kerridge. "I put no questions till then, for all I may wonder whether he 's dark or fair."

Jane's blush tingled under her eyes.

"Ah," said Mrs. Kerridge archly, "what did I say!"

Jane protested — and might protest, so her landlady averred, holding that disclaimers proved her point.

Curley, meanwhile, upon his part, was thinking of Jane. The fires that had seemed extinguished were but sleeping, after all. Jane haunted him, dogging even his dreams. He rose in the night to throw open his window and let in the air of the dawn. His heart and his brain and his limbs were alike hot. He pulled back the sleeves of his nightshirt and laid his bare arms on the sill. The stars were disappearing from the sky at the widening of a stretch of yellow that cut the greyness of the east, and already the crowing of a cock broke the stillness. Curley with impatient sighs noted the signs of the day's coming, and waited for the fever of his blood to abate.

He saw the light creep over the sleeping street. The first sparrow woke and chirped inquiringly; another took up his question, then another and another and another, till a tree that grew near seemed alive with their twittering. One flew down to offal that lay

in the roadway; a second and a third followed; the day of small things had begun.

From far Westminster boomed the hour, and Curley, who had once lodged under the shadow of the clock tower, knew how the ponderous strokes were trembling on the air, and, like the note of a big drum, striking deep into the chest of any who listened at hand. The last in the stillness died lingering into silence; Curley traced it to vanishing, and went back to bed with cold flesh but a heart that still burned.

Not thus had it ever been with him before. What impended?

With sleeping and waking the night wore away for him. He went in to breakfast with Camden and Carson as was his custom. Their rooms were next door, and the three messed for the most part together. Curley played with his food, and presently pushed his plate from him. To push things and people from him was his impulse through the early part of the day. He (as Michael had done once) strained towards the evening. The hours promised to drag. A rehearsal at the music-hall would have been welcome, but there was no rehearsal that day, the previous morning having seen arduous work. Yet he could not keep his thoughts from the place where Jane was appearing as well as he, and where he had parted from her so recently. Soon his steps were tracking his thoughts to Holborn. He paused upon the broad pavement where he had stood with her

the night before. Daylight had changed the aspect of the scene. The mystery of shadows and of stars had given place to the candour of a shining sun. The traffic in the road was tenfold increased; east and west it flowed in surging streams that ran side by side.

Curley went into the hall. The stage was in possession of a troupe of performing dogs. The empty house looked dreary. A T-piece laid stress on what gloom it did not dispel, and Curley in abnormal mood had sense of things and conditions to which habit had long since accustomed him. A girl sat in the stalls waiting her rehearsal. She glanced at him as one who looks for distractions. A man in the orchestra yawned and stretched himself in an interval. Repetition was the order of the moment: "Again, please," to the conductor, and a push or a gesture to one of the squatting poodles, and "Again," and "Now once more." Curley watched for five minutes, and yawned too. The dogs with bright eyes followed their master. Now, one would cower in admitted disgrace, now, wag his tail in the conscious pride of achievement. The girl fidgeted and rustled her sheaf of band parts. An attendant or two hung about the wings. Some repairs were in progress up in the roof, and from time to time a strident hammering called forth a volley of invective from the stage.

Curley turned on his heel and went out. His restlessness did not abate. It set him walking, demanding motion of him, and at first that was all. Then it

urged a southern direction, and this Curley, driven, pursued. He scarcely acknowledged his purpose to himself, yet he had a purpose at the back of his mind, and so his footsteps a goal that was definite. Nor was this Jane's home. He had not found out her address (though he might have done so), and his memory told him no more than the quarter in which she had once lived. The name of the street had escaped him, if ever, indeed, he had heard it. He was not, however, going to look for Jane.

In time he found himself near Waterloo Bridge. By then the ardour of his walking was cooling and his project must be acknowledged or abandoned. He hesitated and acknowledged it. He crossed the river, and when he reached the tram-lines took his seat on a car for Camberwell.

It was now early summer, and soon he was passing through a district that was green and cool. Here and there a garden spoke of the country, and a cottage or two with a lawn and flowerbeds told how great London had engulfed a village. Trees and ivies and shrubs told the same tale. It seemed fitting that a blue sky should hang above. Curley, unnoticing by nature, to-day saw clearly.

At Camberwell Green he alighted, and thence struck southwest, took his bearings, and turned out of wide streets into narrow. The spot would be changed, he knew, the lane would be gone with the hoardings, and houses have sprung from the ground ; yet he wanted to see the place of his brutality and

there to think over the passion that promised to have him and his passions in subjection. (A soul certainly seemed to be struggling upwards in Curley like a little green leaf towards the light from out of the dust and the ashes; or one might be pardoned who thought so. Jane might be pardoned who fancied him changed.)

He found what he sought, and found more.

"You!" he said. "Ah!" and stood still.

For Jane and he were face to face.

CHAPTER XX

CURLEY said, "What brings you here?" and Jane, blushing and confused, shook her head. He repeated his question and added, "Shall I tell you?"

Then Jane spoke hurriedly.

"No, don't tell me," she said.

"I'll tell you why I came, instead, then," said Curley.

He was holding her hand, and she had to look at him, constrained by many forces which she did not understand. "I came here because of you."

"You did n't know I should be here," said Jane at once. "You could n't have known. I did n't know, myself."

"I came here because of you, all the same," said Curley. "I could n't rest because of you, and that 's true if I never speak another word. What have you done to me?"

Jane was trembling. The colour was leaving her cheeks.

"Nothing," she murmured, and tried to smile.

"Something — a good deal. I 'm different even from what I was yesterday. You kept me awake half the night, and I've been round to the hall this morning, too, and that's because I can settle to nothing, because of you."

Jane drew away her hand.

"People will wonder," she said under her breath.

"I wonder myself," said Curley.

Jane was wondering, too. Was this Curley? Curley who laughed and lived well? Curley who lived for himself and who loved himself? Curley who had not stopped at the thought of outrage?

Jane looked away for nervousness. Her eyes met a row of shops, some finished and occupied, some finished and unlet, some in course of fitting. Twenty yards from where she was standing, the lane had run between the high hoardings. How terrible they had seemed to her in their blankness. Curley had made them terrible, yet here was Curley beside her, the hoardings gone, and the houses seemed to smile with the day. She had no fear of him now, nor was the commotion into which his presence threw her ungrateful to the senses. What did it all mean?

Curley was looking at her with burning eyes. She had to speak, and it seemed natural that she should speak of the place.

"I should hardly have known it," she said.

"Ah, you see," said Curley, "you see."

Jane turned quickly, but moved her eyes slowly to his. Her expression asked what she had said.

"You do remember?" he answered.

"I 'm not likely to forget."

"But you think different of . . . what happened."

"Why should I?"

"You would n't have come else."

Jane looked down. She twisted a loose button on

one of her gloves and it came off, to lie at her feet for some moments, a tiny disk of shining metal to which her eyes were attracted again and again before she thought of picking it up.

"I don't know why I did come," she said, answering his words rather than that which lay behind them.

"Yes, you do."

They persisted in turn.

"Then I 've got to tell you, after all," said Curley. "You came for the same reason that brought me — or one like it. Yes, yes, yes. Deny it as much as you like. You came because you were thinking of me, Curley Merino, as I came because I was thinking of you. Confess it."

Jane was silent.

"Answer me."

She turned away, and looked up the street. A lark in a cage over one of the shops burst now into singing — sang of lanes and green fields, of streams under willows, of uplands yellow with sun, of joy and of youth and of love. The bars of his cage could not shut in his song from the world. Jane heard it; and the boy-god stirred in his sleep and felt for his bow and his dart.

"Why not own up?" said Curley with a return to the manner she knew. "Why not tell me I 'm right? I 'm not often wrong."

"What do you want me to say?" asked Jane, smiling at last. "I 'd nothing to do, and I thought

I'd like to see what had been done here, that's all."

"Not quite all," answered Curley. "You don't traipse about over London to see all the building that's going on. If there's nothing in what I'm telling you, we should n't have met."

"I've met you before, and it was chance."

"This is n't chance. Come here."

He walked from her a few steps. She did not move. He beckoned.

"What for?"

"Come," he said. (Imperious Curley spoke then.)

She followed him.

"This is where you fought with me. How you fought! Well, you are fighting again, but it's not with me. It's with yourself. Why do you fight?"

She was standing now, perhaps, within a foot or two of the exact spot whereon she had reached the turning-point in her life. Her childhood lay on the other side of it and of the night that seemed so long ago. Curley had divested her of it forever. Yet was it Curley alone? Not wholly for her wrestle with him were the night and the place branded on her memory. Then, and there — nay, here, here, here she had met Michael!

Curley saw her face change. In truth she receded from him as she recalled Michael.

Where was Michael? Why had he left her? She had thought Curley ignoble. Was he? Was he? and were her own eyes being blinded? Curley could be

cruel; could take advantage of brute force. Michael was thoughtful and gentle. But Michael was gone. Oh, what was she to do?

"I can't talk to you now," she said. "I want to think. I'm not sure about anything — oh, I can't tell you what I mean, you're not a girl, you wouldn't understand. I want to be alone, and you must let me go without following me. You must."

"I love you and you love me."

"I don't know. I don't know."

"And I'd marry you," said Curley on an impulse.

But this seemed beside the point just then. It was the soul of Curley that was being weighed in the balance. Jane in this moment could conceive of a case less dire in its consequences than marriage. The question was of Curley himself, not of his readiness to be bound by the law.

"If I knew that I loved him," she said to herself. "If I knew he loved me . . ."

He suffered her to go and so lulled a doubt of him. Had she misjudged him? She pondered as she went.

Kennington was pink with may and yellow with laburnum. She passed Dawson Street, at the corner of which she used to be put down in the days of her engagement at the Camberwell Palace, and alighted from the tram-car near Vauxhall Station. Thence she walked to the Albert Embankment. She wanted to see the river. She had a fancy that to watch the flowing tide would ease her troubled spirit. She was bewildered, and could understand neither Curley nor

herself — herself less, perhaps, than Curley. Why had the sight of him left her troubled when the thought of seeing him that evening had so elated her that her happy excitement had been patent even to Mrs. Kerridge? Yes, and she had been glad to see him. But the surprise of it, which she remembered now with the surprise on the face of Curley! Yet her emotions had not been compounded of surprise and gladness only. Mingled with the first and dominating the second there had been a sense of shame as at detection or exposure. The pale things that live under stones might feel as she felt when the stones that hide them are lifted. Curley knew! Curley knew! Let him not tell her! This was the thought she had put into words, and, in saying, "Don't tell me," the admission was made. She stood self-convicted before him. What matter? Oh, the blue sky, and the lark that had sung, and the freshness and the beauty of Curley! What matter? What matter? She passed by the buildings that shut out the river, and reached the wide pavement of the southern embankment. Lambeth was like a fishing-village to her right. Low, uneven houses with gaps and boarded spaces flanked the road. One might have looked for drying nets to hang on poles from out of the low windows. Sunlight steeped this bit of London. The bare limbs of children sprawling in their play upon the flags recalled days when the world was younger. A baby, revelling in the joy of life and of the warm stones, had kicked itself bare to the waist. Jane could have kissed the pink creases of

its fat little legs, and have crowed and purred over it for the love that sprang up in her. Oh, beautiful world! The tide was rising and flowed quickly. Barges showing bright colours, greens, and vermilions, and yellows, floated up with the stream. Here by her side a man or two lounged over the wall. Something that was leisurely and restful characterized this corner of the town. Jane noted everything.

She had wanted to be alone and to think; was she thinking at all in the sense she had meant? Curley was serious — wanted to marry her. What was her answer to be or (more narrowly viewed) her attitude?

Her life, in a way, was most lonely. For safety she kept to herself. She remembered her lovers — that would be; and the letters that frightened or plagued her. Curley could save her from these, and protect her, and cherish her — if he loved her and if she loved him. How to know? For she pined to be loved, and the very hunger for love might deceive her. That she loved Curley's beauty she knew, but you don't marry bodies alone. All thought of Michael made her uncertain. Michael had withdrawn himself (seeming drawn to her), and must mean her to know he had shaken himself free of her. What else could she think? Curley was changed. Time was when he would not have pleaded. He offered her love, and she wanted love grievously. If Curley had but been Michael . . . Ah, that was it. The root of the matter

lay there. Yet it was Michael who had failed her, not Curley.

The evening when it came found her still undecided. She was elated and fearful by turns. She came purposely late, and did not see Curley's performance, but she knew he would wait for her.

That night she consented to sup with him. The conditions of her consent were clearly set forth. She did not fear that he would violate them.

"Where shall we go?" he asked.

"Anywhere — where you like. But somewhere near."

"Choose," said Curley. "I want it to be just wherever you'd like."

"I don't know," said Jane simply. "You know more about places than I. I don't know any of the places round here. I've only had supper out three times at all."

Curley's eyebrows went up. Here was a child.

"Four — if you count a time I want to forget and that we won't talk of. The other three were, once with Nelly Chingford and Mr. Goldstein at the Criterion, and once with Mrs. Kerridge and Mr. and Mrs. Atwell — they're friends of mine — at a place near Victoria Station — I forget the name. It was my birthday, and that was my party; and once at Gatti's, the night of Mr. Abraham's benefit when we all went — those that sang for him, I mean."

"Has no one ever taken you out to supper?" said Curley.

"I would n't go," said Jane.

"You 've been asked and would n't go?"

"I 've a little boxful of notes at home."

Jane delivered herself of this proof of temptation with a modesty that masked a pardonable pride.

"Why would n't you go?"

"I 've got to look after myself."

"We 'll go to Frascati's," said Curley.

He was about to call a hansom when Jane stopped him.

"I know where that is. I 've often passed it. I 'd rather walk."

"Well, it 's only a step," said Curley, "but it 's a funny way to take a lady to supper."

"I 'd rather," said Jane, thinking that the walk would have had part in her conditions if it had occurred to her, but it had not. Curley, however, was not rebelling.

They reached the restaurant and went in. Curley led the way to the circular gallery, and looked for a table. Two were vacant. A waiter waved his hand in indication of that presided over by himself, but Curley looked beyond him.

"Would n't this one do?" Jane said timidly, seeing the people were looking at her.

"That one 's better," said Curley.

They passed on. Yet for one reason or another they returned to the first; and so it came to pass that Jane and Curley (though no one knew it) chose

the table at which upon a time Michael had sat with Mr. Atherton. Here Michael's fate had been settled, and here sat Jane with her destiny (as she supposed) in the balance.

As Michael had done, she looked about her with alert and interested eyes. The music-halls, in which so much of her time was spent now, had accustomed her to light and colour, but here she seemed to be at closer quarters with life itself. A woman recognized her and touched her companion. Jane saw the action and the look and the whispering that passed between the two. That was fame. Was it grateful? Very. She looked preternaturally unconscious and took off her gloves. Her hands were white now, and their whiteness struck her and was a source of pleasure to her. She wore one ring.

Curley saw it presently.

"I want to give you another," he said — "one different from that."

"I could n't like any so well," said Jane. "It was mother's."

A recollection of the hand that had worn it came to her — not a white hand. "Oh, mother!" she said to herself, "mother!"

"Three emeralds," said Curley, "with six little diamonds between — four between and one at each end: I saw a ring like that to-day after I left you."

Jane shook her head, but she smiled.

A waiter filled her glass. She watched the sparkling bubbles that danced to the surface.

"Are you changed?" she said; "are you changed or are you the same Curley?"

"Oh, I'm changed," he said. "I couldn't now . . . don't you believe me?"

"I don't know what to believe."

"You wanted to think. Have you thought? If you've thought, you must believe. Why, I see myself changed. I've never been like this before."

That Curley should confess himself at her mercy was assuredly triumph for ingenuous Jane. Sovereignty seemed pressed upon her. She might grant, of her clemency, or withhold.

"You mustn't be unhappy," she said generously.

They ate for a few moments in silence. The click of knives and forks had its part in the sounds to which Jane paid unconscious heed; a hum and a buzz of talk played through it, pointed now and then by the laugh of a woman. Dishes that were new to Jane tempted her appetite. The world was a smooth place.

"Oh," she said, "it is all so strange."

"What is strange?"

"That this should be me." She gave a little laugh. "Sometimes I wonder if it is me. It's like as if it must be some one else: I'm Jane Smith and it's Jenny Tandem that all this is happening to. I never thought . . . I wouldn't have believed such a little while could alter my life so. Doesn't it seem strange to you?"

"You were bound to get on," Curley answered.

"No — that's just where it is," said Jane. "I was n't. It's been wonderful luck and somehow I can't quite believe in luck coming to me. I've always been timid. I've always been afraid of — of something happening. I can't explain. I used to be afraid of the dark, and of being alone, and of a crowd, and of lots of things. Luck does n't come to people who are afraid. It comes to people who can use their elbows. You've heard Nelly's song."

"'The girl pushed through,'" said Curley, and hummed.

Jane caught up the refrain and hummed too, under her breath.

"The Girl pushed through —
Such a steady girl!
Said, 'I 'm just as good as you' —
Such a ready girl!
With her nose in the air,
And her arms held square,
She said, 'What 's the good of elbows
If you can't push through?'"

"That 's the sort of girl who gets on," said Jane. "That 's the kind with luck."

"The girl who helps herself," said Curley.

"That 's not me," said Jane, pursuing her thought, "not Jane Smith."

Curley winked.

"But it sounds like Jenny Tandem."

Jane gave a little exclamation.

"That 's it," she said. "That 's it! It 's Jenny Tandem who is getting on. Jenny Tandem is n't me

at all, and one day they 'll find out that I 'm only Jane Smith and all my luck will leave me."

Jane did not know that conversely Jenny Tandem might cheat Jane Smith. Yet Jenny Tandem had robbed her of Michael.

"Oh, it is strange," she said.

It was stranger than she thought.

CHAPTER XXI

SHE did not relinquish the subject at once. Curley devoured her with his eyes as she talked, but he did not alarm her as once he had alarmed her. The knowledge grew certain with her that it was hers to withhold or to accord.

She told him of the time that had followed the ending of her engagement at the Camberwell, of the disappointments, the hopes, the fears.

That was Jane Smith, she said comprehensively and in fine.

Curley continued to look at her. Others looked at both.

"That boy and girl . . ." a man called them, pointing them out to another.

In truth they were like children.

"I want you," Curley said.

"You 've said that to more girls than one."

"Never to mean it as I mean it now."

"You 've thought you meant it before."

"I know I mean it now."

"But how am I to know?"

"Because I tell you."

His eyes were pleading. Jane came near to loving him. She let her pupils meet his in a long look.

"If I could know . . . If I could trust you . . ."

"Listen!" said Curley. "There have been others

I don't deny it. But none like you, none. I'll give them all up for you. I swear I will. I love you. Love's changed me. You see it yourself. Look, we'll make it fair and square. It shall be at church if you like. I ain't afraid of being bound."

Jane was silent.

"Mother'd be glad," pursued Curley. "She always liked you, and she's often said she hoped I'd marry young. Why won't you listen?"

"I am listening. I like your mother very much, indeed. You know that. It's myself I'm afraid of — and I'm afraid of you. I can't help it. You can't wonder, Curley. It's a big step, and it's for always. What should I do if you got tired of me?"

"You would n't say that if you did n't think you could love me."

Jane was silent again.

"Tell me," he said, "tell me . . ."

"If I marry you I shall love you," Jane answered then.

People had begun to move. Here and there a table was empty. A waiter yawned behind his hand. Two young men, passing out, exchanged nods with Curley, and one said something to the other at which both laughed. The one who had spoken turned round to wink at Curley, and Jane blushed.

"You see what they think," she said.

"A couple of fools," said Curley.

"But they know you, and that's why they think — what they think."

"Who cares what they think!"

"I care. I'm like that. I can't help it."

"Then marry me," whispered Curley, leaning on his elbows across the narrow table, "marry me. There's the last answer to what they or any other fools might think. Be my wife. You may n't be the first girl I've liked, but you're the first I've wanted to marry. Come, you love me a little bit, I know you do, and you know you do, but I know more than that..."

"What do you know?"

Curley bent nearer.

"You've loved me since..."

"Stop!" said Jane.

"Since..."

Jane protested.

"I hated you," she said; "I hated you then and for a long time. I only forgave you because — I don't know why I did forgive you, or whether I have forgiven you at all."

Curley said, "Some day you'll own it."

"Never," said Jane stoutly; and Curley replied:—

"We'll see."

Jane felt that she must prove to him that she had not loved him, and was conscious at once that the power on which she had been congratulating herself had undergone some diminution. In corresponding degree Curley's strength seemed to have increased.

"How could I when I was hating you, and saying I'd never speak to you again?"

"You don't hate people you care nothing about," said Curley. "You're owning it now."

"I'm not, and I never will."

They argued the matter, till Curley dismissed it with:—

"I can wait—for that, but not for you."

He pleaded again, and Jane felt her sovereignty returning.

She gave him no answer that night, but agreed to meet him the next day. He suffered her to go as before, nor attempted to accompany or follow her.

Then Jane's pulses beat high. Curley loved her. It was wonderful, and she had held him off with words as once with her hands. She said "Me? Me?" to herself incredulously. Later she said, "How could I?" and that was the thought that took her to the borders of sleep and that was waiting for her when she woke. She lived again through the evening many times, recalling Curley's tones and his looks. She knew now what a happy evening it had been. Nothing that had occurred had been lost upon her. She recalled even his gestures. Perhaps he was right, and she had loved him always. "No, no," came then from the back of her mind to meet "Yes" and "Yes" and again "Yes" from the deeper sanctuary of her heart. What matter if she knew that she could love him?

Yet she hesitated still, and for the very knowledge that once married to him she would love him. She thought she was speaking for herself when she told Curley that marriage for her would mean love, and

did not dream that she spoke for ten thousand of her sisters, and touched the key of their ten thousand tragedies. Little Jane, like each one of us, thought her case (with her caution) unique.

She had woke early, and sang as she dressed. There was a servant now in Little Petwell Street (such was Jane's prosperity), a slip of a girl with long skirts and a fringe, and a cap that flapped in draughts from a single hairpin. Her name was Gladys, and her entrances and exits were cyclonic. She appeared with Jane's breakfast and a letter. The sight of an envelope always caused Jane a tremor. Time had been when she had watched and waited and followed the postman with her eye or his knock with her ear. If Michael had written by chance or by fate!

Her heart bounded and stood still. But the letter was from Curley. Through the racket and clatter of Gladys's movements, Jane tried to fix her attention upon what he had to say to her: He had but just left her and was to see her again a few hours hence (a hurricane came from the tablecloth as Gladys, her cap working on its hinge, sent the drapery ballooning to flatness), yet he could not rest till he had assured her again of his love for her. Let her believe it, believe it. (Jane's plate spun to its place, her cup danced in its saucer as it plumped down beside her.) Let her know that all night while she slept he would be thinking of her. (Jane's knife and her fork struck the board and rebounded.) To-morrow — to-day she must answer. (The teapot was whisked from a chair,

and the plate that held a slice of fried bacon as well, and when the tray had been dropped and recovered, the gusty Gladys was gone.) To-morrow — to-day! Why not? Jane would answer to-day or to-morrow.

She ate her breakfast in abstraction, rising more than once to go to the window. Another glorious day had been given to London. Its influence was in Curley's interest.

When the time came to start, Jane set forth with an open mind. She would decide as circumstances directed.

Curley was first at the trysting-place. She saw him before he saw her, and had time to observe him. He was walking slowly from her, having turned in his pacing at the moment immediately preceding that which brought her in sight. She let him walk to the end of his beat and waited for his return. He hurried towards her.

"Jenny!"

"Curley!"

He took her arm, and she did not seek to withdraw it. Battersea Park was empty. Mayfair had not discovered it then (nor the use of the wheel), and Curley and Jane had the path to themselves.

Over the water Chelsea lay basking in sunshine.

Curley said, "Have you thought of me once since I left you?"

Jane put on archness and said, "Not as often as that."

"Well, I've only thought of you once," said Cur-

ley, with emphasis on the pronouns, "and that's ever since, for I haven't stopped thinking of you yet. You've thought of me, too."

"Yes, I've thought of you."

"I had to write to you."

"Had to?"

"Were you glad?"

"Yes."

"And will you give me an answer to-day?"

Jane's little face grew inscrutable.

The most he could get from her then was, "We'll see."

"Now, what shall we do?" Curley asked presently. "We can stay where we are or go for a ride. I know a place not ten minutes from here where I can get a pony and trap, and you've only to say the word and we'll drive down to Epping Forest or Hampton Court."

Jane's eyes were on the river. It ran through her life as it ran through London.

"Could n't we go somewhere in a steamer?"

"If you like."

"Greenwich," said Jane; "I've never been to Greenwich."

A boat was in sight.

"We might catch her," said Curley, and they began to run towards the pier. They were laughing and breathless when they reached it, but in time. Curley took the tickets, and soon the boy and girl were sitting side by side and close together on the

deck. Jane's face was aglow from the exercise and excitement. A year fell off her; she was a child, and expressed herself in questions and exclamations.

"Are you happy, dear?" whispered Curley.

"So happy."

"Have I anything to do with your happiness?"

Jane's eyes were dancing. "Listen to that little bell," she cried; "Ting! Ting! did you hear? That's because we're coming near the next pier, is n't it? There 'll be another Ting! Ting! in a minute. There! Look how the water's bubbling. You can hear it being churned, can't you? You can feel the machinery throbbing, too. I 'd like to get it all into a song. Oh, yes, I 'm happy."

Curley repeated his question.

Jane nodded.

The sun sent up shafts of light from the ripples. Jane thought them like bunches of shining knitting-needles.

"But you can't look at them to see rightly what they are like," she said. "They dazzle your eyes. Now I can't see anything."

Presently she said, "I believe it 's diamonds they 're like — thousands and thousands of diamonds."

"Still thinking of the sun on the water," said Curley.

The sun on the water had its share in the causes of Jane's present happiness, but she would not have been able to explain, nor did she try. The funnel ducked under a bridge and a sound that accompan-

ied the action caught Jane's ear. It would have to come into the song, too, she thought.

The steamer crossed the river and recrossed it, now taking up and discharging passengers on this side, now on that. Buildings ugly in themselves were made beautiful by the lights and shades of this fair day. To Jane nothing was ugly.

"I 've got something to show you," said Curley, after a brief silence.

She turned to him from her survey of the banks. He put a finger and thumb into a pocket in his waistcoat and drew thence a small box.

"You were speaking of diamonds a minute ago," he said. "I spoke to you yesterday of emeralds. What do you think of this?"

He pushed the little hook out of its eye and raised the little lid. The box held a ring.

"Oh, Curley!" said Jane.

The two were alone where they sat; there was no one to see or to hear. The stones seemed to Jane like green fire. She looked from them to Curley's face.

"Oh, Curley," she said again.

"What 's the matter?"

"I — I had n't given you any answer."

"Cheer up, then," said Curley with a smile. "There 's no harm done, and you can send me about my business still if you 've a mind to. I have n't bought it. It 's on approval. They 'll take it back and return my deposit, if you don't care to have it. I thought I 'd like to show it to you, that 's all."

Jane held it up. The stones sparkled in the sunlight as the ripples were sparkling on the water.

"It'd be too good for me anyway," Jane said, dubiously.

"It's easy to say that nothing's too good for you," said Curley, "but I think it."

"Oh, if I knew what to do," Jane thought. "It's lovely," she said aloud, giving him back the box. "It's lovely."

"I should like you to try it on."

Jane hesitated.

"Then before the day's over," Curley said.

She nodded. So much she could promise.

A moment later, thinking she had been ungracious, she was moved to add, "I think it's very nice of you, Curley."

Past the tower and the docks and shipping and warehouses and wharves sped the boat that bore Curley and Jane with their fate, as each thought, undecided. Cherry Garden Stairs — the sound of the words and what associations they conjured up for Jane — set her spirits rising again like swelling quicksilver. Perhaps there were orchards there once, and red fruit ripening in such sunshine as was warming and gilding this day. The world itself seemed young.

Greenwich Hospital came in sight. Presently they landed.

When they had lunched, they strolled into the park. Where Michael had walked thinking of Jane, Jane walked with Curley. Together they sat on the

grass of the slopes. Long silences fell between them. Curley rested his head on his arm and lay back. Jane's hand was near him as it plucked blades of grass. He put his own nearer. Jane's slid into it.

"Then you love me," he said, under his breath.

"I'm going to love you."

He held her hand to his lips.

"The fight is over?"

"I'm going to love you," said Jane again.

They talked for a space, of luxurious happiness, love and the sun and the breeze that stirred the leaves contributing thereto. Curley closed his eyes. She took advantage of this to look at his face intently. The light could find no blemish in the clear fine skin. That struck her first; then the curve of the eyelids and of the lips and the chin made her think of statues she had seen. Tears rose to her eyes. She was filled with a great pity for him, for herself, for all things living. She saw a blurred image. Unwittingly she had drawn nearer to him. He was conscious of her nearness, and without opening his eyes he drew her face down to his, whispering endearments.

"Oh, be good to me, Curley," she said.

"Good to you? Why, I love you."

"Love me always."

He promised, protesting.

CHAPTER XXII

To go back to Michael.

The year of his silence, the year that had seen the unfolding of Jane, as a bud that opens its curling petals, had not left him stationary. To all appearance a tide in his affairs, as in the affairs of Jane and of Curley, had been taken at the flood, and was leading him on, if not to fortune, at least to prosperity. So much seemed definite. But there were times when he wondered whether happiness came under either head. At such moments he was at war with his fate, and a restraint found its way into his manner with Mr. Atherton.

Mr. Atherton kept silence then, telling himself (for solace, perhaps) that some day Michael would forgive him, would even thank him. Since a certain long talk which had taken place on the evening succeeding that of Michael's arrival, and a few riders thereto incidental, one subject had been closed between them. By tacit and mutual consent it was skirted or leapt. All that needed to be said had been said, as it seemed, then or thereabout, and Mr. Atherton, having spoken, left his words to succeed or to fail of their intention. He had confidence in Michael, Michael in him, yet (the name Jenny Tandem sticking in Mr. Atherton's gorge) their joint reticence was based upon misunderstanding. Never, howbeit,

had counsel been prompted by kinder feelings or a more affectionate interest. Michael could not resent advice so proffered, nor, in calmness, deny its wisdom. No promise was asked of him. That he should not bind himself at the outset of his career (Michael having admitted that though he was not heartwhole he was free), but wait till he knew what life might have in store for him, was all that Mr. Atherton suggested. Jane was not mentioned. Michael had her in his mind; Mr. Atherton, Jenny Tandem; and like persons standing on opposite sides of an object of different colours and supposing them to be the same, neither knew that the other did not see what he saw. Michael was torn in two ways.

He wrote to Jane once, as we know. Loyalty to his patron put a check upon his pen. Loyalty also caused him to tell Mr. Atherton that he had written. He made his statement frankly and not as one who makes a reluctant confession. Mr. Atherton heard him contemplatively. Presently he said: —

"Why do you tell me, Michael?"

Michael hesitated.

"I think it is due to you to tell you, sir."

Mr. Atherton put his hand lightly on the young man's arm.

"I think a great deal of you for this," he said. "It proves to me that I am not wrong in my estimate of you. It is consistent with all that I know of you — representative almost. I am not often mistaken in people."

He paused and added :—

"But it increases my wish tenfold . . ."

"Your wish?"

"That you should take your bearings before you enter into any engagement."

Michael had flushed with pleasure at Mr. Atherton's commendation. His face became grave as the last words were spoken.

"You don't like my saying that, Michael. I had made up my mind not to speak of it again."

The matter dropped. Mr. Atherton said to himself that Michael was a gentleman through and through, and was moved to reconsider certain conservative views he had held on the connection between birth and breeding. Michael came of the people, so far as he knew, and had a delicacy and a refinement that were obvious and incontestable. Michael, for his part, would have flushed more deeply had he read the word in the mind of his friend and his master, for it was not as a gentleman that he felt he was behaving to Jane.

"Oh, Jane, Jane, Jane," he said under his breath, as it was, and his heart grew big.

How would she take his letter with its stilted phrases? Would she read through and between and over and under, and know that the very paper was steeped in love and in thought of her? Would she divine the severity of the curb he was putting upon himself, and believe — believe . . .

It was but for a while. He would not change, he

was sure. Jane would be Jane to him to the end of all time, let him reap what advantage fate and Mr. Atherton might put in his way. Jane would be Jane — the Jane of the child's face and the tears by the hoardings; the Jane of the sweet little voice, the tremulous, plaintive; the Jane of the hair like spun glass or spun sunshine, and the mouth of a little child; the Jane of some laughter and the ways of a child; the Jane of numbness and dumbness finding words at the parting . . .

"Oh, Jane, Jane, Jane!" he said again.

He set himself to work and to look forward. A year he gave himself — or, more properly speaking, gave to Mr. Atherton for the testing of his advice. After that he should feel himself free to determine his course. In a year, moreover, it was possible that he would be in a position to offer Jane a home. He counted the days. Late and early the sound of his fiddle made itself heard across the quadrangle on to which looked the window of his room. The days of the drum were over — the days even of tedious lessons. He assisted Mr. Atherton in his duties, and in return, in addition to a small salary, he received such individual instruction from him as nothing but gratitude and love could repay. Even after he had made up his mind to accept Mr. Atherton's suggestion and wait, there were times when he had misgivings on his account — so sure was he of the enduring nature of his sentiments towards Jane. Mr. Atherton gave so much, he (Michael) harbouring constancy to the

music-hall singer, could give so little. Pains he could take, and took; affection, deference, and his hearty allegiance he could give; but Jane owned him and he would not change.

Once of his honesty he spoke what was in his mind. Mr. Atherton had been devoting to him an hour (of a time that was valuable), and with perseverance and exquisite patience had helped him to master a difficult theme. Michael had thought himself stupid, but Mr. Atherton's gentleness, under what Michael knew must have been an irritation to his nerves, had at least been equalled by his own attention and anxiety to satisfy in return.

"Once more, Michael, and you have it."

Michael played the thing through. He knit his brows as he neared the passage that presented especial difficulty, but conquered it with an effort that was not unduly obvious.

Mr. Atherton's commendation led to his avowal.

He looked at his master intently and said, "I feel I am not acting quite fairly. There is something — some one we don't speak of, and because we don't speak of her it may seem to you that I have ceased to think of her. I wish I could please you in this. You've done everything for me."

"Why do you think you are not dealing fairly?"

"I haven't given up thinking about her. I can't. You are helping me to reach a position which may enable me to earn a living. Suppose it should happen

that you were helping me to — to —" he paused for a word, and not finding one broke off.

Mr. Atherton hastened to reassure him.

"Think as much as you want to," he said. "At the most, I should like you to wait before you bind yourself by any decision — say eighteen months or even a year; and if at the end of that time you are of the same mind, I shall have nothing to say. But I don't ask you to wait at all, Michael. Understand that. Who am I that I should meddle with your destinies? If my advice (I don't like so strong a word, but let it pass) seems good to you, follow it, but if not, reject it freely. I shan't like you any the less."

It was then that Michael finally determined to wait the full term, let waiting cost him what it would. For all this time he would not see Jane — perhaps even abstain from writing to her. She might forget him, might even marry, but these were hazards which had to be faced. The knowledge that these chances were against him was bitter enough sometimes, but more bitter was the thought of what Jane would inevitably think of him, and the belief (though this was mingled with a sort of negative comfort) that she would suffer on his account. Her suffering and his own were not to be avoided. Life demanded this suffering of them both. Kismet!

So work was his refuge and his hope. He was working for Jane. He had admitted as much even to Mr. Atherton, and need no longer reproach himself with unfealty. Jane was his prize in the race, and he

would win her. Fate meant the one for the other — then what was time? He would work for a year and a half cheerfully.

Mr. Atherton, to do him justice, wished less that Michael should forget the music-hall singer than that (and for the young man's own sake) he should give himself an opportunity of wider vision before focussing his regard upon one whom he had seen under the narrower conditions of former days. That he expected Michael to forget her was probable. The loves of youth were not long loves, he held, whatever might be the length of his thoughts, and he believed that he had gauged his fellow-creatures to some purpose. He encouraged Michael to work — and not at music alone. He was no half-hearted friend. He had taken Michael in hand, and, if it lay in his power, he meant him to rise to that world to a place in which his inborn refinements seemed to entitle him. Michael was a gentleman at heart; Mr. Atherton intended him to be one by education and manners, and had good material to work upon.

He observed Michael quietly, and by the end of a few weeks he could not suppose him to be suffering very grievously. Nor was he. His mind and his body were healthily active, and he did not brood unduly. That there were times when the ache for Jane would not be stilled and found expression in a demeanour strained and reticent has been said ; but it would not have been natural that he should suffer continuously, and he did not. His life, on the con-

trary, was full and happy with intervals only of depression. He had now companions of his own age, and (though with a reserve that was temperamental) he made friends easily. But Michael forgot not Jane. He was as cognizant of her progress as if he had been in communication with her; for he followed the records of it in the paragraphs that gave chronicle of her little successes. He could have told you at what halls she had sung and the name of her new song. He looked at her card weekly, albeit knowing it by heart. But of her private life he knew nothing. Sometimes he held his breath for the pitfalls that must lie in her path. Admirers there must be about her now, and lovers to whom she would seem fair game. God keep her, and God keep her straight — though straight or not (so much had philosophy taught him) she would be Jane still and he would love her to the end. Thoughts of Curley at times disturbed him . . .

When Mr. Atherton observed signs of restlessness, he devised some distraction. Music was the atmosphere they breathed, then away from music he was taken. The theatre became a source of great enjoyment to them both, and at one time or another they saw much that was worth seeing.

Michael expanded as a plant, and looked towards Jane as a plant to the light. Six months saw no abating in his purpose. He heard Jane in his music, read her into his books, found her in pictures; judged by her, saw through her eyes, and tried to look into

her heart. Still he kept silence. Fate was to settle the question, and give or withhold her. Mr. Atherton did not suspect the strength of his love for her. Michael knew that and laughed, and repented the laugh as often as not, for his master had, besides gratitude, a share of his heart. In the late summer a new pleasure was given to Michael; Mr. Atherton took him to Paris, and showed him a city of art and of pleasure. Michael remembered a day at Greenwich when he had guessed vaguely at the delights that life might hold and had devoted his thought to Jane. Some day — who knew? — he might be showing her Paris. He even prized the knowledge that he was gaining, on her account. Jane's education, he knew, was defective: what happiness if one day he could help in its extension! On that thought he dwelt for many an hour, and saw Jane listening and trying to understand; understanding and giving him proof of it; working and striving till even Mr. Atherton should know why he chose her. The sea had been a delight to him, and every yard of the way had possessed a charm for him. He caught up a word or two of French, and surprised Mr. Atherton by giving to the sounds a close imitation of their actual value.

Michael deprecated any unusual aptitude. He had the ear of a parrot, that was all.

"You shall read French before I've done with you," said Mr. Atherton.

"You will unfit me for my station," Michael said, smiling.

"I want to," said Mr. Atherton, smiling, too.

Jane lurked in the back of his mind, Michael was sure, and he did not pursue the subject.

Later in the day Mr. Atherton recurred to it.

"It is not I who will unfit you — or could unfit you for the station in which you were born. Somehow you never belonged to it. I think I knew that years ago when I tried you for the choir at Birmingham. I only want to help you into the one to which you really do belong. Hundreds of people go through their lives in exile. That must n't happen with you."

After all, Michael thought, Jane need not read French — or could be taught It was the first time that it had occurred to him that he might regret his own advancement. He dismissed the idea at once.

The autumn and winter went by in the routine of work. Mr. Atherton added French to the subjects of his tuition, and found his pupil intelligent as he had expected. Daily Michael made progress in his studies, musical and general, and Mr. Atherton began to feel certain of the success of his system. Soon he was sure he might let his pupil go forth, for he would go proof against the meretricious charms of Jenny Tandem and her kind.

So passed a year.

Then came the spring, and even Manchester put forth leaves; even Manchester birds nested; and even in Manchester young men's fancies lightly turned to thoughts of love.

Yet through the spring Michael was steadfast, and summer drew near.

Then came a day when starved Michael hungered for a glimpse of Jane and a touch of her hand, as men have hungered for bread. He woke with Jane in his mind and her hands at his heartstrings. He could not work. The singing of a lark maddened him; the colour of a flower at his window set his pulses leaping. He threw down his books and went out. Mr. Atherton, it chanced, was away. There was no one to soothe and to calm him; no David to lull by his playing a trouble as of Saul.

The weather was fair to ease souls. Its very fairness disturbed him.

On such a day what was Jane doing in far London? What? What? What? On such a day what was she thinking and of whom? His thoughts rushed towards her as his restless feet bore him along the crowded pavements. How like London were parts of this town — like, yet unlike. The people spoke a different tongue; he fancied their type was somewhat different, too. The thronging traffic looked the same, and the hurry and the fret of life: the fret — that had got into his veins and the fever, too. Jane, Jane, where was she? what doing? of whom thinking? Jane, Jane, Jane. The word sprang to his very lips, and he murmured it under his breath, and thought of the night when she had told him that her name was not Jenny Tandem at all, but simple Jane Smith. They had talked of names then, he and she;

and she, with the ingenuousness that was part of her, had praised his. Michael even remembered the blush that had flowed to her cheeks (to ebb slowly thence) as a sense of the personal nature of her comment came to her. Dear Jane . . . dear child . . . dear Jane, Jane, Jane . . .

For what was he renouncing his chances of happiness? Happiness lay for him Janewards. Did he not know it? Wisdom might have its semblance in Mr. Atherton's counsel, but, with the tugging at his heart, Michael saw with clear vision that such wisdom masked folly. Wisdom and folly — the terms were interchangeable. What did he seek in his life if not happiness? What ask of it? Success? As a means. His very ambitions pointed to Jane. Then, as if urgent thought of her conjured her image to rise up before him, from out of the void he was given a glimpse of her face. In abstraction he had allowed his feet to carry him whither they would. Where he went mattered little so long as he moved. His nerves demanded motion of him, and he walked quickly, heeding no longer the crowd, but absorbed in his thoughts. Jane looked at him suddenly. Whence? For a moment he knew not, his heart standing still, and for a space of time minuter still, unmeasured, and perhaps unmeasurable, he believed that his imagination had played him a trick. Then he was sure that he had seen her face. He retraced his steps, and found Jane's photograph in a shop window.

He pressed near. Other people were looking in,

too, attracted not by any special photograph, but by the sight of faces that for one reason or another were deemed interesting enough to the public to warrant their display. Bishops were here, and royalties, statesmen, and the lights of the stage. Jane's photograph stood in a row with several of each. Underneath it was written in pencil the name by which she was known at the music-halls.

Jane was for sale with the rest. One-and-sixpence would buy her.

CHAPTER XXIII

MICHAEL went into the shop. Excitement flushed his cheeks, and, though it was improbable that the young woman who came forward to serve him saw in him anything more unusual than a young man buying the picture of an actress, excitement in a measure affected his manner. He could scarcely see the photographs when they were spread out before him. There were three "positions" of Jane in all. The young woman thought she had a fourth, but found she had sold it.

"They only came down last week. They're quite new, and I've sold about a dozen of them already. A gentleman bought two of her this morning, — he had the one in the hat that I was telling you about, I'm nearly sure — and another gentleman bought three the same as these yesterday."

"The same as these," said Michael mechanically.

That Jane's photograph should be for sale spoke to her progress; that there should be a run upon it raised a storm of thoughts and fears that Michael had lulled to rest. What had he been dreaming all this time? And dreaming was the word for his inaction, for to dream implied to sleep. He must have been sleeping. The young woman was speaking again. He looked at her dully and thence to objects in the shop: opera-glasses, barometers, telescopes,

cameras, mathematical instruments in cases, and photographs. There were spectacles, too, of divers kinds, and many shining things.

Presently Michael pulled himself together sufficiently to hear what the attendant was saying. They had a large assortment of celebrities, she was telling him, and would he perhaps care for any of these? — the Prime Minister, they sold a great many of him, or Mr. Gladstone?

No, Michael only wanted the three he had picked out.

She put them together into a large envelope. Should she send them? But he thanked her and preferred to take them. As if he could spare them for an hour! He was impatient to be at home and alone with them.

"We shall be having some more in a day or two, and if you are passing, perhaps you would step in and see them, sir."

"Others, you mean?"

"The same lady, sir, but different ones, very likely. There are probably some more published."

"There is, anyway, the one you spoke of . . .?"

"To be sure, the one in the hat. Shall I get it for you? It would be here by Wednesday morning."

Michael ordered it at once, and, having given directions as to the sending of it and paid for his purchases, he left the shop.

His brain was still whirling. Across nearly two hundred miles Jane had called to him. He looked at

the precious parcel he held, and longed to open it, yet would not till he should be safely in his own room. How strange it was — yet not strange at all. What more natural than that her success and her prettiness should have induced photographers to publish her likeness? He might have expected it and looked out for it. Oh, he was glad at this tangible proof of her advance. He knew how ardently she had wished to get on.

He hurried homewards like a child with a toy. But, like a wave that has receded and gathered force, there broke over him the fear that a few minutes since had overwhelmed him in the shop. What if by waiting he had, indeed, lost Jane? If here in Manchester, where she was not known, there were two or even three people besides himself who admired her sufficiently to want a likeness of her, was it to be supposed that there were not dozens in London who would have need not of a photograph only but of Jane herself? Hundreds had seen her nightly in these many months that he had spent away from her — and to see Jane was surely to love her. Were others different from himself? He winced at the thought. Fool that he was and blind! What to do? He reached his room and shut the door.

With fingers that trembled he opened the envelope and took out the three shiny cards. Jane looked up at him from each. He spread them before him and drank them in with his eyes, gazing intently into the eyes of each one as if to force recognition from them.

No, she was not changed. He sought with dread for any expression of less clean a soul and did not find it. Jane had still the eyes and the mouth of a child. Now Michael would take up one photograph, now another. The likeness in all of them was admirable. The one which had caught his eye as he passed the shop window was of Jane in such a dress as she used to wear when she sang "The lane where the violets nestle." At first he believed it to be the identical dress he remembered at the Camberwell Palace of Varieties, but a little thinking soon told him that this was of costlier make and material. Jane, of course, now could spend more on her wardrobe, and did so, he doubted not. A little lizard brooch appeared in the photograph, and set him wondering. It was in a second photograph also, but not in the third, which was of Jane in a simple white dress, and pleased him best of the three.

So long he held this one that almost he believed the lips smiled at him. He murmured endearments under his breath.

"How I love you and want you," he whispered. "How I think of you and wish for you."

Then: "What have you thought all this time? Could you trust me? You might till I die or you die. If you died, I should want to die, too. Jane — Jane — Jane."

Presently: "And I'm coming, I'm coming. Wait for me, Jane. Wait for me, Jane, a little while longer." He held the photograph then to his lips and pressed

them again and again to the face. Mr. Atherton's scheme had not worked. Michael loved Jane as ever. His mind was made up.

Still, he would do nothing till Mr. Atherton came back. He would not even write. Surely having waited for nearly a year and a half, he could wait for a couple more days. His hand ached to write — to tell Jane he was coming. Two days, two days, that was all. Mr. Atherton even would not wish to keep him from Jane when he saw how it was with him. Of so much could Michael be sure, knowing as he did the goodness of his master. The period, moreover, which had been suggested for his waiting was nearly up. Mr. Atherton did not wish to coerce him, and would be satisfied that his affections had stood the test of time.

But time dragged. Never had two days held so many hours. It was as if the chafing of the months of steadfast purpose had been cumulative or was now taking vengeance upon him for such repression as he had imposed upon it. Impatience gripped him, lashed him, scourged him. Fear held him, too, at intervals. But there were moments of hope. From one of these he was thrown into despondency by a line from Mr. Atherton saying that he expected to be delayed another day over the business which had called him away. Comfort came to him presently in the shape of the photograph of Jane which arrived the same morning.

He released it from its wrappings and found her

once more as he knew her — childish, innocent, and pretty enough to distract him. She wore a very simple dress — of linen, he guessed, with a broad white band round her slender waist. He spent twenty minutes looking at her counterfeit presentment, and extracting therefrom such emotions as the sight of it afforded him. Then, becoming aware of the hour by the striking of a clock, he put the photograph upon his mantelpiece (a wish to see it again the moment he came in prompting him), and left his room to go to a practice which was held on this particular morning, and which it was his duty to attend. His thoughts for once wandered. He regretted that he had not locked up the new likeness of Jane with the others. He would not wish it to be seen by irreverent eyes. He knew the comments such things evoked. The picture of an "actress" was held fair game. He could not bear that Jane's name should be profaned by thoughtless lips. Then he remembered that no name was upon it; nor was any one likely to go to his room.

The practice over, Michael would fain have gone back. But Mr. Atherton's letter had contained some instructions upon a matter in which he wished his pupil to act for him, and it was late in the afternoon before Michael found himself crossing his threshold. He went in with his eyes directed towards the mantelpiece, but he saw at once that the room was not empty.

Mr. Atherton rose from a seat by the window. After all, he had reached home an hour ago.

"I'm glad," said Michael, when he had greeted him, "I wanted to see you."

He asked then after Mr. Atherton's health and of his visit to Liverpool. It was plain the while that he had something in or on his mind, and Mr. Atherton waited for him to speak. But Michael had difficulty in beginning.

Partly to give him time, partly to help him, Mr. Atherton got up and went to the mantelpiece. He bent down and looked at Jane's photograph.

"Not any one I know?" he said.

"You have heard of her."

Mr. Atherton searched his face.

"That is Jane Smith," Michael said.

There was a pause and then Mr. Atherton's "Tell me," brought Michael to his side.

"I'm going to disappoint you," Michael said, "but I can't help it. It's stronger than I am — stronger than anything else I know about. I've waited, but I can't wait any longer. If you knew — and if you knew her! I wanted to please you — you've done everything for me. What should I be but for you? I wanted to give your advice a fair trial. I know the wisdom of what you told me, but I was sure of myself all through, and now somehow I dare n't wait any longer. I was sure of myself, but I must make sure of her. The time I set myself to wait is nearly up, but since I have seen this" (he touched the photograph), "I can't finish it out. If I lost her . . . I believe she cared for me when I went away, and

you don't know what she is to me. It 's my life, Mr. Atherton. Think . . . but oh, believe that I 'm not ungrateful."

"Why have n't you spoken before?" Mr. Atherton said slowly.

"I thought I could wait. I could have waited but for this."

He touched the photograph again.

"She sent it to you?"

"No, I came across it by chance in a shop — not this one which only came this morning, but another — three others, which I got two days ago. I 'll show them to you."

He unlocked a drawer and took thence the envelope that contained them. He was silent, his face wearing somewhat a heightened colour as Mr. Atherton examined them. Something akin to anxiety was in his expression, yet mingled with indications of other emotions. Chagrin was one of these, hope at the root of a second, steadfastness to his purpose (come what would) at that of a third compounded of the other two.

Mr. Atherton raised his eyes at last, and spoke out of the silence in which Michael had thought to hear the beating of his own heart: —

"And this is Miss Jenny Tandem?" he said.

Michael nodded.

"Properly that one and this are Jane Smith," he said in tones as steady as he could muster or master. He picked out the two of Jane in private

dress. "The other two in costume are Miss Tandem."

He paused and added, "I have never thought the name suited her."

"It doesn't," said Mr. Atherton. "One could hardly imagine anything more — misleading."

He fell into thought.

"... If it is not these that are misleading," he said, half to himself.

"These?"

"The photographs."

"They are very like her."

"Then the name is misleading — that and the circumstances it was my lot to associate with her."

Silence fell again between them. Mr. Atherton moved back to the hearth. He rested his elbow now on the mantelpiece and looked down into the grate, where a couple of ferns banked up by moss took the place of a fire. The photographs lay on a table close by.

"What do you want to do?" he said, at length.

"To go up to London and see her. To find out if there is any hope for me. If there isn't . . ." He paused, and Mr. Atherton waved that contingency aside. It need not be faced in hypothesis.

"If there is?" he said.

"I can wait as long as need be. I could not marry yet anyway, but I must know whether I am to look to having her or not. I can't work, I can do nothing till I know. I'm not speaking without having thought."

"You need n't assure me of that, Michael. I have the proof of your fourteen — fifteen, is it? — months of waiting. My advice, such as it was, has been granted a fair trial. I wanted you to look about you before you committed yourself to any one. You 've looked about, or you have had an opportunity of doing so, and you 've been constant to the conviction you brought with you. I 've nothing to say against your going. On the contrary, I bid you go, and my heartiest good wishes go with you."

Michael knew not what to reply. He could only say that he had expected the permission to go, but that Mr. Atherton's kindness overcame him.

"I could almost say now that I would wait out the eighteen months."

"My dear boy, to what end? It is your happiness that I had in view — or, at least, if there was anything selfish in my wish, I can say with truth that I believed your happiness and my inclinations with regard to it lay in the same direction. I was wrong. I own it frankly, and God forbid that I should stand in your light. Perhaps love is the one thing that matters. I would not have you miss it for all that ambition could give. It is as if a man should gain the whole world and lose his own soul. You have found out what love is. Maybe in my time I have known, too."

Mr. Atherton's eyes were shadowed by memories or thoughts. Michael, looking at him, saw him as he believed he had not seen him before, or saw him,

perhaps, for the first time as he was, and, seeing, wondered what life had denied him. He appeared at this moment like one who was seeking for what he would never find, and yet who had learnt, in his search, resignation. Michael experienced a deep emotion.

"I don't know how to thank you," he said. "I wish I could make you know what your goodness has been to me, sir, and how I respect you and love you for it. You must let me say that. If I could show you . . . but I can't, and you must just believe it, sir. You do, don't you, Mr. Atherton? You don't think me ungrateful. I could n't bear that you should."

"I have n't seen you every day for this past year and more without knowing you. You need n't fear. If I have any doubts they are on the score of the expediency of the policy I have pursued in this matter. I have none of you. You must n't think that the debt is on your side wholly — or, indeed, at all. I have had a greater pleasure in your companionship and, if you like, in your education than I can tell you. I was lonely enough sometimes before you came to me. If you are willing, we will cry quits."

Michael shook his head.

"I wish now," Mr. Atherton said presently, "that we had talked more openly about this lady." He took up one of the photographs as he spoke. "All this time I have known nothing of her, and my speculations have led me astray, as speculations will, whether they be upon things human or divine. And this is like her?"

"Very like her — as like as a photograph could be. You get no idea of her colouring, sir. Her eyes are blue. I have never seen bluer eyes. It 's like looking into the sky or the sea."

Mr. Atherton smiled. Michael's tongue was loosened.

All that evening the two men talked of Jane. Mr. Atherton heard of her gentleness, her timidity, her innocence. Michael told of her first appearance — how even then she had thrown her unconscious spell over him — told of his subsequent meeting with her, of the scene by the hoardings, and again of the circumstances which had led to his dismissal, and which, though they were known to Mr. Atherton, were now seen by him in the new light of his corrected conception of Jane. He told of his visit to Greenwich Park, of his depression and his hope (Jane was motive in each); of the remorseful little letter that came from her the next day. But Mr. Atherton had seen this already. No matter, he would like to see it again. Michael produced it. Mr. Atherton read it with new eyes. It seemed such a small thing now that "grieved" had been spelt with an *e* and an *a*. Jane's eyes looked at Mr. Atherton reproachfully from the photographs, yet forgave him, he believed. Then Michael told of the parting.

"She said I should change," he said, "said that it would be I and not she that would change, and I told her that nothing would change me, and I went away . . . and I only wrote once."

He broke off. His silence was heinous.

"What can she think of me?" he said to himself, but did not give utterance to the thought aloud, lest he should seem to blame Mr. Atherton.

On his part Mr. Atherton was saying inwardly, "And this is the girl! This is the blatant Jenny Tandem! This the common Jane Smith!"

Thoughts that were disquieting lay behind these. What if, indeed, Michael had lost her? What if his own scheme had succeeded too well? That the obnoxious Miss Tandem would marry had not been a hope absent from his mind. Out of sight, he had told himself, would be out of mind with Jenny and her class. He knew the type he had supposed her to represent. But Jane, he believed, did not belong to it. Then woe to him who had been ready to jump to conclusions. He had forfeited, perhaps, by his meddling the good-will of Michael forever.

His whole wish now was that Michael should achieve his purpose. Jane would be found to have waited, he said to Michael and to himself. The constancy of good women was instinctive. He said that to himself so often that it is open to doubt whether the statement carried with it any real conviction.

Michael was to go up to London the following day. Mr. Atherton, parting with him for the night, promised to see him off in the morning.

"You can find her at once in London?" he asked the last thing before he went back to his room.

Michael said that he knew her address.

"Or rather," he said, "I know where she is singing. I have her private address, but she may have moved to another. I shall find her, all right. I have known almost exactly where she has been singing ever since I came here."

"I wish we had spoken of her."

"I wish we had."

"Or that I had seen those."

He indicated the photographs.

"You imagined her different?"

"Very different."

"How?"

"Very different. Totally. Almost of another clay. Things misled me — the name, her profession."

"She is *in* the last, not *of* it. How did you account for — for my . . .?"

"I thought she had got round you."

"If you knew her!"

"I must know her. I shall want to. Good-night, Michael. Sleep well. It's not long till to-morrow."

"To-morrow, to-morrow!" Michael said under his breath. "To-morrow, to-morrow!"

He turned back from the door.

An hour later Mr. Atherton was still awake — two hours, three.

"If by my interposing I have put them apart . . .!" was the burden of the thought that would not let him rest. He tossed this way and that, and cursed himself for taking upon him the prerogative of Providence. Meddling was the word for his action —

meddling or interference! To harry him further a proverb sprang to his mind and buzzed there like an imprisoned bee. "Of little meddling," it insisted — "of little meddling — little meddling comes great ease." It seemed to have been framed to disconcert him. "I never was a meddler," he protested in self-defence — nor of his temperament was he. Live and let live had been his maxim consistently, but he had hoped to help Michael to live.

"Will he hate me?" he asked before morning.

But Michael did not look like hating him when they met some few hours later. They stood on the platform together. Michael's small portmanteau held things for the inside of a week.

"Don't hurry back," Mr. Atherton said to him; "stay as long as you want to, and I will arrange for you here."

Michael thanked him.

"Two days or three," he said — "four at the most, will be all I shall want, and less if fate is against me. But I'm not going to think that."

"Wise man; go with hope in your heart. Remember, the gods like a cheerful lover, and above all a lover who won't be denied. Despond and they shy at you."

Michael nodded and smiled. His smile was always illuminating to his somewhat grave face. Mr. Atherton noted it then.

"Smile at her, Michael, like that, and she won't have the heart to refuse you."

Whereat Michael's smile broadened into a laugh that displayed his white teeth, but he said, "If she's free! If she's free! For a year is a long time and a year and a quarter is longer."

A guard told intending passengers to take their seats.

Michael jumped into the train, where his stick kept a place for him and leant out of the window.

"Michael, if wishes and prayers avail anything, mine are with you. God bless you and give you your desire. You'll have it, I believe and I trust. But . . . if anything should baulk you . . . think as kindly of me as you can."

Michael wrung his hand.

CHAPTER XXIV

On his arrival at Euston, Michael drove straight to a little hotel in Covent Garden, the name of which Mr. Atherton had given him. Here he engaged a room and unpacked his bag. Cold water and a generous brushing soon removed the dust of travel from him, and then it only remained to him to make up his mind as to what course he should pursue. He had eaten nothing upon his journey, and Nature suggested a quest of food as a preliminary step.

He went down to the coffee-room and ordered a light meal. While it was being prepared, he set himself to determine how and when he should make his presence known to Jane. He had had ample time, it may be thought, to make his plans during the journey; but he had not done so, unable to come to any decision regarding them, and he found himself in London now without a mind made up. His first inclination had been to go directly to Little Petwell Street, but the thought that in all probability she had quitted her lodgings there, and the knowledge (based upon an understanding of his own temperament) that a check at this point would inevitably assume the gravity of a portent for him, deterred him from setting out for South London. He would wait till the evening, and go to the Oxford where she was singing at this time. There were a few hours to get through in

the mean while. He considered how he should dispose of them. A thought of Mrs. Sands and a strong wish to see her again led him to ask for a South Eastern time-table. He found that he should be able to accomplish a visit to New Cross, with an hour or so to spare on his return; and a rising fever in his blood precluding the possibility of physical inaction, he jumped up and made for Charing Cross.

To-morrow — yesterday's to-morrow was to-day. The same town held Jane and himself. At any moment he might meet her. His eyes scanned the faces of people in the streets. He peered into cabs and carriages. The hair of a girl in a hansom might have been the hair of Jane. The glimpse of it was momentary. Perhaps Jane had passed him. He wondered whom he should see that he knew; you always met some one in London.

He reached the station and took his ticket. The platform held many persons, and Michael walked amongst them as one in a dream. Was he, indeed, in London? He felt as if it might happen that he should wake presently to find himself in his little room at Manchester, with only the recollection of a dream to account for his present impressions. Then might the events of the last few days have been dreamt also! He touched his breast-pocket and felt there the stiff card-board that was the mounting of Jane's photograph. He had not dreamt that, and he smiled to himself; and a girl on the platform lost her heart to him. When the train came in, she took her

seat in the same compartment with him. She devoured his face with her eyes, and wondered about him, and wove penny novelettes around him (poor little unknown shop-girl with the hungry heart!), and she blushed when he met her gaze by chance, and looked down and grew pale, and Michael was not even conscious of her presence. She got out at Cannon Street, and Michael never knew that love had been offered him. Thus had love been offered to him before, more than once, and he had not suspected it. He wanted no love but the love of Jane.

The train moved back out of Cannon Street, and loitered to London Bridge. In a pause between that and Spa Road, Bermondsey, scraps of conversation in other compartments of the third-class carriage in which he was sitting were audible to him. He found himself listening to the voice of a woman: —

"I should 'a' liked a white satin meself," said the voice, "and a bit of tewle and orange blossoms, same as you 'ad when you married Jow, but the wedding was very quiet, and she wore her gowin' away dress as I said, and she looked a perfect picture. I'm sure, as I stood by them rails, I thought to meself I 'd never seen a prettier couple — but what a pair of children, when you come to think!"

"They are young," said another voice, "but I don't 'old with long engagements."

"I declare they looked a perfect boy and girl," pursued the first speaker. "Of course he 's older than what he looks, but, upon me word, he don't appear

a day more than seventeen, and 'er about the same. Well, she deserves to be 'appy, and I 'm sure I 'ope she will be, for 'e 's got a treasure if ever there was one. Talk about angels! It was a pity you could n't come."

"Yes, I was vexed," agreed the other, "but 'Arry was so fev'rish I made sure he was going to be ill, and I did n't dare to leave 'im. Your 'ead don't ache now, my precious, does it? 'E 's below par the doctor says, that 's what it is. 'E 'll soon be 'imself again, won't-cher, dear? when you 've had the nice meddycine."

The train began to move. Michael heard no more, and at Spa Road there was a general exodus. New Cross would be the next station. Michael's restlessness was increasing unaccountably. He was alone now in the compartment in which he was travelling, and he went from one window to the other. The view from each was familiar to him. Nothing seemed changed. Jane would not be changed . . .

Almost his journey to New Cross might have been in search of her, so full of nervous apprehension was he as he approached his destination. Once Jane had travelled hither also. She had not found him. Would he not surely find Mrs. Sands? He wanted to shake her hand; to hear news of Sands and the children; to show that he was not changed. No one must be changed. No one would be changed — surely, surely.

He alighted and left the station. He hurried in the direction of his old lodgings. His nervousness was

not to be explained. He had done wisely, he told himself with sarcasm, not to go to Little Petwell Street. A change of aspect there would have sent his heart into his boots. He knew himself well, and the knowledge gave him little satisfaction just then. Still he wronged himself, for he was stronger than he supposed. But he was not to know that yet.

The music-shop where he used to give his lessons at the meagre shilling an hour lay close by. For some reason or other he had less sentiment in connection therewith than with the house where he had lodged, but he turned into a street that would take him past it, meaning to look in for a moment.

He found it gone. A grocer's shop replaced it. An inquiry elicited the information that the music-seller had retired six months back.

"Six months," said Michael, and looked about him. "You've altered the place a good deal. I should not have known it."

"We've enlarged and improved it, sir, I think — and a fine lot of money it ran into. The taxes, sir, on one's own improvements I venture to think an imposition. A man makes an outlay at considerable expense and raises the value of the property at his own private cost — is it fair, I ask you, that he should be called upon to —"

"Mr. Cheston has retired?" Michael said absently.

"Six months ago."

"You've been very quick —"

He looked about him again.

"Quick, sir! The dilatoriness of builders is a subject upon which I have a word or two to say. Is it just, I would ask you, that one should be kept out of a house for weeks over the time estimated for completion and occupation? A strike of the brick-layers! Why don't the employers band together more than they do. I speak, I may say, as an employer myself and I would ask you — "

Michael took leave of a politician.

Mr. Cheston gone, the shop altered out of all recognition! Well, six months was a long time, and fifteen was longer. Much might happen in as many weeks or days or hours.

He had not proceeded many steps when he heard the grocer calling after him. For a moment (no name being used, but only 'Heigh!') he did not realize that he was being addressed, and he walked on in his abstraction.

"Heigh! you, sir!"

"Me?"

"One half-second, sir."

The man came a few yards down the road. Michael returned his steps to meet him.

"In case you are a friend of Mr. Cheston's, sir, you may like to know (or may know it) and I forgot to tell you — that he is married, sir."

"Married?"

The old music-shop keeper! It was surprising.

"Yes, sir — a widow of some years, but well-looking, they say, and with a pretty little bit of money,

if what I hear is true. She was the widow of a wealthy coal-merchant (I used to think of coal myself before I settled on dry goods, and sometimes regret it), and the gossip is that she was an old flame of Mr. Cheston whom I succeeded, sir, but have not the pleasure of knowing; and, anyway, her fortune enabled the worthy gentleman to retire into private life. That is all, sir. It slipped my memory at the time, but I thought you might like to know."

Michael said he was much obliged, and his informant made him welcome of the news, and they parted once more.

The house in which he had lodged was unchanged, at all events. So much he decided as he came in sight of it. The hall door was still green, and there were flowers in the parlour window. A card announced a room for a single gentleman — his old room, perhaps.

Michael rang. Some one was singing hard-by. The voice ceased, and a footfall announced the approach of the owner of it. Michael experienced a thrill of apprehension as he heard the latch click.

He was reassured the next moment by a voice he knew.

"Why, if it is n't Mr. Seaward! Where do you spring from, sir? Come in."

Michael shook her hand. It was cool and soft from the washtub.

"A little bit of rinsing as I wanted to get done," she explained in parenthesis. "And how are you,

sir? But there, I need n't ask, or else your looks belie you. Well, I am glad to see you; and have you come back to me? There 's your little room upstairs. I declare, it 's providential. The young man only went out of it day before yesterday."

Michael said that he had not come to stay. He was in town for a few days only.

He noted crape on her dress as he spoke.

"Come up to-day and come straight to see me," she said, with her face beaming; "well, that is kind and friendly of you, to be sure. There are n't many lodgers like you, sir, and many and many 's the time I 've said I wished I had you back. Never a grumble nor a bit of trouble. It was always a pleasure to do for you. And how long is it since you went? Close on eighteen months, is n't it?"

"Fifteen," said Michael.

"Ah, fifteen; well, that 's a goodish time, too."

"It is — a long time."

"There 's room for a thing or two to happen in fifteen months," she said. Her eye met Michael's travelling from the crape upon her body, and she sighed. He wanted to ask after the children, but feared one of them might be dead. Well, it was better to ask.

"They 're all right, sir, thank you. Amy you 'd find grown, I think. She shoots up like a cabbage, that child does. She favours her mother's family, for we was all tall at home. I had some bother with Charley's eyes in the winter. I've had to get him

glasses. It 's school does it, but you can't keep him from books, he 's such a one for reading. He always was a bright little fellow, and his teacher says I shall have reason to be proud of him one of these days. He looks a little caution in his spectacles. But he 's that proud of 'em, you would n't believe, and the doctor says he won't hurt much if he wears 'em when he 's at his lessons. They 're both out now, or else I should 'a' liked you to see them. They 've gone up to tea at the Rectory, where there 's a treat to-day for the Sunday School. And here 's baby."

She showed a fine little child asleep in a cradle.

"He was in arms when you were here, but he runs about now, and he 's beginning to say a word or two. He 's getting too big for the cradle by rights."

The children were well, then.

"And how have things been going with you, Mr. Seaward?"

Michael told her something of his life and his fortunes.

"And no worry now, sir, about keeping in work?"

Michael shook his head, smiling.

"I have work all the time."

"It don't make you a dull boy, sir, then. You look better than you used."

"It is n't all work," said Michael, smiling again.

"Yet there 's something about you, sir . . . I don't know what . . . sort of anxious, sir."

Was he so transparent? Did the restlessness engendered by his suspense show so clearly? Restless-

ness in a measure was at the root of his visit to New Cross. Mrs. Sands had keen perceptions.

"Oh, we have all anxieties of one kind or another," he said, "but mine are no longer what they were."

"We all have our sorrows," said Mrs. Sands; "that I know — none better. But you're getting on, sir, and that's good hearing. You don't ever wish yourself back here, I'll lay."

"I have wished it."

"I'm sure *I* have. There's your armchair upstairs that you gave me. Come, you must see it, sir, and your little room. And whatever am I thinking of that I haven't offered you a cup of tea? The kettle's on the boil now."

Michael protested that he had had a meal before he started, but the good woman would take no denial. She fetched a teapot from a cupboard.

"Go and look at your little room, sir. I needn't tell you the way, and it'll be ready against you come down."

"I mustn't stop long, Mrs. Sands — "

"Ten minutes, sir, and the tea'll be ready in two."

Michael went upstairs. The room was much as he had left it. The wicker chair was in its accustomed place. The furniture was the same. He remembered the pattern of the wallpaper. There were little pink roses in it. He was glad to see it again. He had been happy and unhappy in this room, hopeful and despondent. It looked west, and sunlight poured into it now.

Almost he felt as if he had never left it. Manchester was, perhaps, the dream. Standing at the window and looking out upon a familiar view that was not ugly and embraced some grass and trees, he fell into reverie.

Here at least nothing was changed. That was good, and his spirits rose.

Mrs. Sands was calling him. He pulled down the blind, and, having taken a last look round, he shut the door and went down to the parlour.

"Nothing changed," he said, smiling.

"There's your tea, sir."

His eye fell on a portrait upon the wall, in front of him. It was an enlargement of a photograph, such as are done in great numbers by photographers in humble neighbourhoods. It was a picture of Mr. Sands, and the likeness was arresting.

"That's capital," said Michael — "capital," and remembered that in the exchange of questions and answers he had not asked for Mrs. Sands's husband. "I'm sorry I shan't see him. You'll tell him I was sorry I could n't wait. How is he? Give him my —"

He broke off. Mrs. Sands turned away, sat down, and burst into tears.

Michael started up, dismayed.

"Oh," he said, "I did n't know. Something's happened. Forgive me, I did n't know."

"I know you did n't, sir, and I did n't know how to tell you. I saw you look at the crape on my dress . . . Poor Sands is dead."

Expressions of regret and sympathy came from Michael's lips.

"I've been waiting to tell you ever since you came and — and that's not all. I don't know what you'll think. There was the poor children. You had n't been gone a fortnight. It was very sudden. He was n't ill above a week. Oh, my poor William. It came upon me like a shock. The best husband a woman ever had — never a hard word, and such a good father. You remember the pride he took in those children. He made an idol of baby, did n't he? And he was always thinking of some little pleasure for them all. The very week before he was taken ill he took 'em and me to the Crystal Palace for the day, and he carried baby most of the time himself because he was such a heavy child and he would n't have me tired. And when I think . . ."

Michael tried to comfort her. He said that he did not think it was wholly loss to the living when those they loved were taken from them. She shook her head. Michael went over to the portrait and stood under it. It was artless enough, as even he could tell, but it recalled the big, hearty man to him vividly. It was coloured, and colour had not been spared. The frame might be blatantly gilt, but Michael with clear eyes could see through what was tawdry. The outward form mattered little.

"It only came home last week," said the young woman, drying her eyes and coming over to where he stood. "I only had a photo of him, done just

after we were married, and they said at the shop it could be made into a portrait, so I had it done. It's just like him, is n't it? I've seen him look like that, times and times. He had just those blue eyes, and even when he was ill, he never got really pale. Such a strong man, and only thirty-two when he died. It was inflammation of the lungs. He got a chill one day at the works — it was the Wednesday, and I shall never forget when he came home. They sent a mate with him, he seemed so bad. He was hot and cold, shivering so as his teeth chattered, and then feverish enough to burn you. I sat up with him all that week and I never believed he would n't pull through. The doctor feared from the first, but I said to myself I would pull him through if God 'd let me. It's my one comfort now that I never left him day or night, and I've need of comfort sometimes, I can tell you. You don't know yet . . ."

Her eyes swam in tears. Michael was deeply moved.

"A fortnight after I left," he said.

She nodded.

"He was only ill a week from first to last. He died in these arms. Do you believe I'm sorry, sir?"

He looked at her in surprise, half supposing he had not heard her aright. She repeated her question.

"Sorry?" he said blankly. "Sorry?"

"Yes. I told you, you did n't know everything. There were the children. What can a woman do?"

"I don't understand, Mrs. Sands."

"That's it. I'm not Mrs. Sands. I've married again. It was a mate of my William's — the one who came home with him. I told him I could never love him like William. He was set on it, and it meant keeping on the house, which I was n't sure I could ever do. And he knows how it is and wanted me all the same. I've been Mrs. Offis these three weeks."

CHAPTER XXV

IT was with a feeling of bewilderment that Michael heard of Mrs. Sands's second marriage. He thought of her still as Mrs. Sands, and, all unconsciously, called her so when he said good-bye; but he took a last look at the green-doored house as he reached the end of the street, and thought that its familiar aspect masked changes, after all — grave changes. The world does not stand still; what had he expected? Marriages and death were in the air. Mr. Cheston was married, Mrs. Sands widowed and married again, even the women to whose talk he had listened in the stop outside Bermondsey Station had been discussing a marriage.

He remembered that suddenly, and the threefold thing gripped him. He wrestled with it in the train. It loosened its hold reluctantly and left him shaken. When he reached Charing Cross, he hurried back to his hotel, where he changed his clothes and wrote a line to send in to Jane, when the time should come to apprise her of his presence. He put this in his pocket, and set himself to wait. He could not eat. Perhaps Jane would sup with him. The thought braced him. She had liked him once . . .

In the hour that remained before he could present himself at the music-hall he went through various phases of emotion. At one time he fancied Jane wait-

ing for him, at another indifferent to him, at another lost to him. In after years he looked back upon this hour with shrinking, and wished to forget it.

London was full. The season was in early swing, but Michael knew nothing of it. The traffic was a little more congested, that was all. He took his way to Oxford Street, and waited for the doors of the music-hall to open. Jane, he expected, would not appear till halfway through the programme, but to-night nothing must be left to chance. While he waited, he read the posters that held Jane's name, and after he had satisfied himself that there was not a case of photographs of her on which to delight his eyes, he went a few steps up the street to look at the stage door through which she must pass, and whence, later, she would, perhaps, come to greet him. He would be waiting as he waited now. His life was made up of waiting. It might be that all life was made up of waiting. Yet he could imagine supreme moments which should be the prize and the solace of years. Early or late they might come — or never.

He watched the river of vehicles flowing by, and the narrower stream of the footpaths. Was there no rest where life was? Then happy the stones or the dead. Some one pushed passed him — a woman in a tattered shawl. She held pencils and once had held oranges; he knew her directly. Before, she had heralded ill-luck and luck — had brought him the tale of the rain when he was looking for moonlight or stars to walk under: he had been like then to lose

sight of Jane, but had seen her in fine. This woman had blessed him.

"Pencils," he said; "matches sell better."

"Nothing sells," said the woman.

"It used to be oranges."

"Once it was chestnuts." She did not recall him. "I've been better off in my time, and it's been chestnuts 'fore now. But they sold up my can. So it's pencils or anythink else, and a fat lot of profit you git from 'em. They're two a penny. It's givin' away — fair presents, I call it. The po'r'd better not 'ave stomachs, I say, when there's nothing to put in 'em."

Michael held out sixpence.

"I don't want the pencils."

"Not a drop do I touch, sir," she said, "not a sip pass my lips, or I'd drink your 'ealth like a lady. I've six po'r little children — penny a piece for 'em this makes, and not empty to bed, thanks to you, for this night. You'll never want a sweetheart, sir, I can see in your eye; and good luck to you, sir, with the girls."

She shuffled on, and made straight for the first public house.

The doors of the music-hall were open by this time, and Michael moved in. He paid for a stall, and when he had bought a programme and seen Jane's name once more, he took his seat. He was a few rows from the front, and in a good place for seeing and hearing. He wondered whether Jane would see him, and did not know whether or not he wished it.

A few people strolled in. The cheaper parts filled rapidly. The orchestra assembled, and the air became filled with the troubled sounds of tuning. There were wailings and lamentations and groanings as of souls in torment. Now and then through the tumult of noises rang out a jubilant cry as of one freed and escaping. Lethargy crept over Michael. Through it, as through mist, the confusion of notes reached his senses and stirred them. Melancholy and discord were dominant, complaint and protest were there. A 'cello growled its rage deeply. The sounds were for Michael the sob and the scream and plaint of the world in her labour. Life was symbolized, disorder prevailing. Then the conductor took his seat, and, lo, as at the word of a creator, out of the chaos came order. The muscles of Michael relaxed. A feeling of peace possessed him. He was borne out of the stress and the buffet of seas into smooth waters. Something seemed achieved, and he might rest. A waltz of Strauss, dropped into the potpourri arranged for the overture, swung in the air. It approached in its swinging, receded and came back again with rhythm and preciseness — to meet on a sudden a blow in the face (drums and cymbals the fist) that sent it spinning. It clutched at what-not, and seemed dizzy, and tried to keep hold of itself, but lost consciousness. It fell and was shattered, becoming then, as it seemed, a thing of glass or splintering porcelain, the bits of which, littering for a moment, were swept up and straightway danced off — a rioting tune of the moment. The

gallery knew the air. Some one whistled it. Every one upstairs whistled it. It rang shrilly round the roof. There was a rough-and-ready triumph in it, a vulgar jubilation, a merrymaking of crowds. The infection of it, however, was potent, and sensitive Michael tapped a foot to the measure of it. A bit of an opera, a sentimental song of the day, a galop, and a strident march brought the overture to an end, and the programme began in earnest.

People were assembling now. The stalls and the boxes alone were sparingly filled, but half an hour saw men and women taking their places in both. From the boxes women looked languidly into the body of the hall. Fans were waving here and there. Smoke began to show itself as a thin blue vapour, that was elusive when you looked at it, but apparent at other times.

Michael with a throbbing heart watched each number as it was put up. Though he knew that Jane would not appear just yet, not a card was slipped out of its frame at the side of the stage that he did not hold his breath till he read its successor. He paid but intermittent attention to the performances. The early turns he knew to be experimentary in a case or two, and he thought he saw promise in the singing of a young girl. He was reminded vaguely of Jane's début (in which he had unconsciously helped her), and he applauded the beginner's effort partly for Jane's sake.

Familiar faces began to appear. Here was Lilla of

the Hazardous Wire — a stouter Lilla than of yore. She went through her show complacently, the audience giving her her meed of applause, and dropped no knives. (We remember, or more probably forget, so long is it since we met her in Camberwell, that the attitude of the house affected her performance and her temper.) Here were Marie This and Lottie That, ladies of great popularity in Music-Hallia. Here was Apollo, the man of beauty and strength, and here the Sisters Tinker.

A juggler did strange and wonderful things with ease and grace. His turn came to an end. Michael experienced a thrill from head to foot as he saw Jane's number slide into its place in the frame.

It seemed to him that a rustle went round the house. There had been clapping before when the number of a favourite went up; there was clapping now. Michael's hands hung loose in his lap. He wondered vaguely whether his emotion was apparent to those about him.

The orchestra struck up the opening bars of a song. A few moments later Jane was before him.

He leant forward in his seat. At last, at last . . .

His gaze enveloped her — embraced her, kissed her lips and her hair and her eyes. Time stood still. The world held two people, Jane and himself. It was wonderful to see her again. The past months of separation were swept away as clouds by the wind. Nothing now should keep them apart. Jane, do you hear him? Nothing can part you.

Then of a sudden Michael woke out of his trance. Applause had greeted her appearance. That was natural. Why did a voice from the gallery shout, "Good luck to you, Jenny!" and some in the house take up the cry? Why did Jane blush as she smiled, her sweet eyes shining? There was something significant in the reception accorded to her. He was sure of it. Why? But she was singing now, and sounds in the house subsided. Her song was of the twopenny order; but it told of meadows and a cottage by a stream, of cows and milking, of the humming of bees and the scents of the field, of the cool depths of a wood and the tinkle of sheep-bells, of the singing of birds and the sound of an axe. Jane breathed the spirit of the country as she sang.

Even infatuated Michael could gauge the advance she had made since last he had heard her. Her voice was stronger, fuller, and more under her control. She was free of many little tricks which he had excused (even loved) for her sake. Her accent was improved, but not perfect. He loved its improvement and its imperfections.

Applause followed her song. Michael felt for his note, and took it from his pocket. He had closed it, but he said the contents of it over to himself.

"DEAR MISS SMITH," it ran, "I am in London for a few days. Will you see me? I shall wait at the stage door for an answer, or if I am fortunate, for you. Yours sincerely, MICHAEL SEAWARD."

A postscript added, "I wonder whether you will remember me at all."

The words were meagre, he thought, yet what else to say? He had spent many minutes choosing these. He decided that there was nothing else to say just then. She would see him, he was sure of that, and then all must be said upon which he was silent on paper. If she cared for him, if she had not forgotten him, if another had not replaced him, she would read even now what he had left out. He turned the envelope this way and that, and replaced it in his pocket.

The brief interval was over, the orchestra playing once more. The gallery greeted the air with a laugh and a volley of banter. Michael did not distinguish what was said, but again he had the sense of being outside an open secret. He was sure that he lacked knowledge that had been passed from one to another up there. The thought smote him with apprehension.

Jane appeared. She had been in pink, and now wore white. He recognized the dress as that presented in one of her photographs. Its whiteness laid stress upon her youth and guilelessness.

She sang of a lover.

"And I know [ran the words] I 'll be happy with him,
For there are n't many boys like my little boy Jim."

A voice shouted: "What have you done with him, Jenny?"

Another: "Look for him at the Empire."

What did it mean? Michael's pulses stood still. Jane took the interruption shyly but in good part. She sang on. Every verse ended: —

"I know and I know I 'll be happy with him,
For there aren't many boys like my little boy Jim."

A storm of applause followed the song — stampings and clappings and whistlings. Michael had risen to his feet. It was time now to send round his note. He would wait half a moment for Jane's bow. But it was not to be a bow only. The clappings and whistlings continued. Cries of "Encore" interspersed them, and after a brief delay the orchestra played again. Michael was transported to Camberwell, and fifteen months dropped from the tale of the days of his life: Jane was going to sing "The Lane where the Violets nestle." He remembered the day when across the footlights she had met his eyes . . .

He came back to the present as he recognized little alterations in her manner of giving the familiar lines. The Lane had a firmer *a* in it, and violets three syllables. He could gauge the advance of Jane more accurately, now that the theme was known to him, than when she sang the new songs. Comparison, in other words, was possible. He could have wished her performance unchanged. It alarmed him, like everything else that had happened since he set foot here in London.

Now for the last time Jane had bowed, and Michael sprang up once more, and left the house. He hurried

to the stage door and sent in his note. Then he waited. The time seemed neither long nor short before the messenger told him Miss Tandem would see him.

He moved a few steps from the doorway. Twilight had given place to night in the street. Lamps flashed on cabs and carriages. Michael heard the roar of the traffic as from a great distance. He did not look directly at the door, yet he was watching it. A brougham drew up, and a woman passed in with a plentiful flutter of skirts. A man came out, followed by an attendant with a box. The two made for a vehicle that was waiting. Michael recognized the conjuror. The attendant went back.

After him no one passed through either this way or that for five minutes. Then came Jane. He heard her voice before he saw her. She was telling the stage doorkeeper that she would send for her things in the morning.

CHAPTER XXVI

SHE was soberly dressed in a coat and a skirt of some dark cloth that was rigidly plain, but laid stress upon the delicate tints of her complexion and the shining of her hair. Michael noted all that and the quick play of feeling upon her face.

"Oh," she said, with hand extended, "I am glad to see you again."

"Not half so glad as I am to stand talking to you face to face."

"Perhaps I am, you can't tell."

"If I could think it!"

"Believe it. I am very, very glad."

She met his eyes frankly, Michael searching hers. He found in them neither tremor nor reproach. Had she so schooled herself? Jane had always shown her emotions. She was glad to see him — very, very glad, she said. Why did the assurance pain him?

Yet it was plain to see that she was sincere. The pleasure the meeting with him afforded her was written in her heightened colour and her attitude. She still suffered him to retain her hand.

"It's like old times," she said.

"I want to think so," he said, releasing her hand reluctantly.

Some embarrassment showed itself in her manner

then. Perhaps he had spoken fervently. A brief silence followed his speech. Jane broke it.

"How long it seems. I was in my first engagement then, was n't I? and you — I need n't ask how you are getting on."

"It has seemed a long time. Yes, I am getting on. I have followed your career. How quickly you have succeeded. I was sure you would. I 've watched every step of your progress."

Jane looked at him questioningly.

"Have you?"

"Did n't you know that I should?"

"I thought you 'd be glad, p'r'aps, I was getting on."

"Glad!"

"I was n't sure that you 'd hear I was."

"I should hear all I could—you might have known that."

Jane shook her head.

"Because I did n't write?" he said.

She nodded.

"If you knew . . . " he said.

"I thought you 'd forgotten. I was sure you had after a time!"

"I said I should not forget."

"But people do. I thought then that I had been mistaken. Why should you remember? you 'd known me a very short time."

Now Michael saw in her signs of the nervousness that her greeting had lacked. His soul leaped to his eyes.

"I've never forgotten," he said, "never stopped thinking of you. It was because I could wait no longer that I came up to London to-day. I had to see you. Oh, I've so much to say to you. Where can we talk? Will you come to supper with me?"

She was looking at him now as one amazed.

"I can't stay," she said, scarcely above her breath.

"It's not late."

"It is n't that . . ."

She broke off.

"What, then?"

"I don't think I understand," she said, trying to recover herself. "I can't have supper with you anyway. I've got to meet some one . . ."

Michael's heart seemed to stop beating.

"There's something you don't know. I'm — I'm married. Did n't you hear the boys chaffing me? I was married yesterday."

"I thought the occasion was special," Michael heard himself saying after a time.

Jane looked relieved.

"I would n't have sung 'My boy Jim' — not under the circumstances, if I could have helped it. But it's my new song, and I was obliged to. You heard them say, 'Good luck, Jenny,' did n't you? They're real friends if they like you."

"And they all like you and you like them all?"

Jane looked at a watch on her wrist — a little gold watch in a bangle, the present of Curley. For Michael its elegance marked the changes that fifteen months

had wrought in Jane's fortunes and Jane. He scarcely felt the blow she had dealt him as yet. He was surprised at what he thought his fortitude.

"I must go," she said, "or I shall be late. You have n't wished me good luck. Won't you?"

"Yes, of course," he said mechanically, "I wish you good luck."

"Thank you," she said. "It 's been nice to see you again. I 'm glad things are going well with you. You don't know how sorry I was — that time, you remember. I must n't stop now, or I shall miss my husband. I 'll take that hansom."

He assisted her to get into it. Her manner was hurried now and apprehensive. She wished to be off; he would not detain her. There was nothing more to say, was there?

He heard her wishing him good-bye, and he shook her hand. Then as he closed the doors absently, she spoke to the driver through the trap.

"The Empire," she said.

She nodded and smiled and was gone. At the very last he fancied her smile faltered, and that she had grown very pale. Did she know? What was the matter with him that his impressions were so hazy? Well, she was gone, and he had lost her forever. How quickly the traffic swallowed up the cab that held her . . .

He stood in abstraction on the pavement. Desultoriness possessed him. There seemed nothing particular to do and nowhere to go.

A stranger said, "Hullo, Bertie!"

And another, "Let 'Erbert alone. He's dreamin'. You'll wike 'im."

Then two people laughed shrilly. He moved out of their way. One of them, touched apparently by something in his aspect, came back to say: —

"I'm sorry. I believe you're in trouble. Don't you mind either of us. I know what it is, and I'm sorry."

She sped after her companion, leaving a memory of something kind and sad.

Yes, he was in trouble. He had been given a blow that was staggering. Yet in a manner he felt that he had been prepared for it. His subconsciousness had had sense of the thing that had happened. The very events of the day had led up to some climax, and presaged calamity.

Jane was married . . . married yesterday . . . To whom? To whom? He had not asked — had asked no questions at all. Was he, indeed, asleep and dreaming? A sense of inadequacy and incompleteness — of futility, even, characterized the interview in retrospect. Had he talked with Jane at all? He had hungered and had eaten dust. Dust seemed to be between his teeth. Dust was his portion.

He shook off his lethargy, and searched rapidly in his mind for some indication of the length of time it had held him. He could not be certain, but long as his stupor had seemed to last, it was probable that it had been but of a few minutes' duration.

Jane, then, had but a short start of him. He re-

membered the direction she had given to the cabman: The Empire. Somewhere else he had recently heard mention of the Empire. He recalled the voice from the gallery, and it told him that Jane had married a professional. He could not rest — if at all he could rest — till he knew whom she had married.

He hailed a cab.

"Drive to Leicester Square," he said. "Put me down at the corner of Cranbourne Street."

He lay back pale and inert, but with his mind working incessantly. He went again through his talk with Jane, striving to find out what had lain behind the words she had spoken. The shock he had sustained had driven all natural inquiries from his head. Jane must have remarked that he did not ask whom she had married, yet she had not told him. This thought became fraught with sinister meaning presently. He recalled her impatience to be gone. She had not volunteered her husband's name . . . Had she feared he would ask it? A misgiving that he scarcely dared to admit caused him to lean forward. Quicker! Quicker! Oh, slow horse and congested streets! He must know the worst.

"But not that one," he said under his breath. "Jane, Jane, for your own sake . . ."

The hansom turned into Leicester Square. The lights of the Alhambra made one side of it brilliant, those of the Empire another. Michael alighted, and came face to face with the knowledge he sought: Jane and Curley were walking together. They had

eyes but for each other, and he could have touched Jane's sleeve as she passed him. So near, indeed, was she to him that he heard a few words of her talk. He caught his own name. Jane was telling her husband . . .

Michael stepped back, trembling.

He saw the direction of their steps. They were going to sup at the Cavour, perhaps. He was right. He saw them go in.

He looked this way and that. London stifled him. Now, as he stood still, the neighbouring Empire threw open her doors and the human stream poured out. Almost simultaneously were the floodgates loosed at the Alhambra. Leicester Square was thronged. Whistles sounded, and cab after cab drove off. The gleam of white linen, the shine of a hat, and the fluttering of skirts were dominant in his impressions as he watched the hansoms take up their freight. He heard laughter and swearing, and the hoarse cries of boys in the road.

He saw sights that were ugly — winter and tenderest spring in prospective embraces; and sights that were sad — the smarting tear of repulse; and he looked life in the eyes and read in them its mockery. Where was the pitying God to heal the fretting sore of the world?

The stars were so quiet up there over all. It was restful to turn the gaze upwards. How they must shine on the sea. He wished for a sight of it — knowing it so little, yet conscious that it would have

power to soothe his pain. Once he had thought Jane and he would seek it together. He thought of spray on her hair. What a funny little fancy! Where did it come from?

Jane was married. What to do with his years?

He walked aimlessly from the spot where he had been standing, and presently found himself in Trafalgar Square. He gave a sigh of relief and expansion as he realized that he was quit of the crowd. The patient lions kept a silent watch, and here on the north side something of the turmoil of the town was deadened. Michael felt nearer to peace and the stars. The Nelson column stretched up gaunt and lonely towards them. To Michael, alone with his sorrow, it stood for a symbol of isolation.

He went and leaned against the stone-work below one of the four bronze beasts. He could have cried in the hollow of his arm like a child. Tears filled his eyes, but did not fall, and he saw through a mist till he wiped them away. Then once more he saw clearly.

Life stretched before him like a plain. He was goalless, but must find a goal. He thought of death as others before him have thought of it in such moments of frustration, and told himself death must be peace and a sponge for life's slate — must mean rest and forgetting, at least.

Death could be found for the seeking, nor was he afraid of it.

But Jane who had set his thoughts running on

death held him to life — Jane and another. Of the other he did not think yet. His influence was present, none the less.

He stood for a long while in contemplation of the thing that had happened to him. The horizon was dark. To plod on in the grey light alone was his fate, let him meet it as he would, with submission or set teeth. You had or you had not, nor would ever have. The stars ruled it so.

He looked up at them as one who would know his offence, but they vouchsafed no answer. He waited as if for a sign, till the glimmer of their fires, made steely by exceeding distance, chilled him. No sign was forthcoming. They gazed coldly on his suffering. His heart was full to overflowing.

"O God," he said in his pain, "where are you?"

He could have flung up his arms towards the sky. Instead, he let them fall to his sides. Then his fingers clenched themselves two or three times, while he took a deep and quivering breath, and held it at the last, to release it slowly when a moment or two had passed.

CHAPTER XXVII

IT was some two hours later that he turned his steps towards Covent Garden. He had walked several miles then, and the pain at his heart, if less insistent, seemed deadened by custom. So might one feel with an incurable disease. He was tired and wished for sleep, but he expected a night of torment.

He had never before felt so solitary. All London, all the world, seemed in one scale, he in the other. The need of communion with a fellow-creature was urgent. He believed that if he could tell some one, a stranger, even, — perhaps preferably a stranger, — indirectly of his trouble he would find ease. He looked at a few of the beings who loitered still at the corners of the streets. He knew that amongst them there was to be found here and there a Magdalen whom suffering redeemed in all the degradation of her lot. He remembered De Quincey's friend of Oxford Street. The girl who, to-night, moved by he knew not what instinct of pity, had spoken a word of kindness to him, might be such a one. But he saw none to whom he could speak. Comprehension was not in the faces of any he passed.

He stopped once by a policeman and entered into conversation with him, in the hope of discovering something which might reply to his craving for sympathy; but by chance the man was unresponsive and

taciturn, and Michael turned away. His solace must come from within. It did not strike him yet that this might be God's answer and the answer of the stars.

He walked despondently towards the hotel. A sleepy night porter admitted him, and he went up the dingy staircase where the lights burned low, and along a gloomy passage to his room. It was a long time before he began to undress. Three o'clock struck as he got into bed. The night passed in dreams and waking. There were border states between the two. Jane flitted through all. Twice he stretched out his arms to her. But he knew in his waking that she lay in the arms of Curley, and though the thought was anguish to him, yet, when he looked into his soul, he found that he hated Curley no longer, for Curley was now part of Jane. Behind this, none the less, was an impotent wish to force him into a knowledge and an appreciation of his good fortune.

"If he does not treat her well . . .!" he said to himself more than once, and gauged Curley's lightness, reading him through and through. How could Jane love so lax and unstable a thing? yet how help it, for he remembered the beauty of Curley.

"Oh," he thought, addressing the little wife, "was there no one to tell you the suffering you have prepared for yourself! When he leaves you . . . when he goes after others, without a prick of conscience or a thought for you, laughing — perhaps even telling you, what will you do? You love him, and you 'll love him the more . . ."

For Michael knew Jane, too.

His last sleep was dreamless and resting. He woke towards eight and got up after a brief reflection. He would go back to Manchester. There was nothing to wait for. At first he had thought he would see Jane again. There was much that he would like to know. Never had two people, meeting after a lapse of many months, learned so little of each other. As a friend, even, he had some slight claim on her. Her husband could not resent the bestowal upon him of a few minutes of her time. Yet to what end should he see her? She was outside his life now as he was outside hers. They walked opposite banks of a widening river. No bridges would span it. Perhaps, presently, they would not be able to recognize each other across its spreading flood.

He would go back to Manchester. To see Jane again was to prolong his suffering; moreover, if he saw her he could scarcely hope to conceal his state from her, and, looking back over the short interview with her outside the music-hall, he believed that, if she had any inkling of the truth at all, her conception of it was far from complete. She need never know the blow she had dealt him — should never know. Why grieve her?

But one thing he might do. The thought of it comforted him in a manner, for it gave him something to think of and to do. He dressed quickly and hurried over a meagre breakfast. Then he went out.

It took him some time to find such a little keep-

sake as he would care to give her for her wedding present. His means kept him within certain limits and restricted his choice, and his good taste kept him from choosing what looked superficially above its intrinsic value. A few pounds, five at the outside, was the most he might allow himself to spend, and it was difficult to light upon anything that seemed good enough at such a price. He saw at last a little gold brooch in the shape of a shamrock set with three pearls which formed the leaf, and finding to his satisfaction that the price of it was within the figure he had set himself, he bought it, and took it away in its little velvet-mounted case. Before he left London he posted it to Jane to the care of the music-hall at which she was performing, and wrote half a dozen lines to accompany it: he wished her every happiness, begged her to accept his belated congratulations, and (ignoring the past) he sent a message of felicitation to Curley.

The letter contained nothing to tell of his own suffering. Short as it was (or perhaps for its very shortness), it cost him something to write. His eyes were wet when he folded and directed it. With the envelope he felt that he was closing a chapter in his life.

The letter and the little parcel despatched, he packed his things and paid his bill. It seemed but a few minutes since he had driven up to the hotel on his arrival.

From Euston he telegraphed to Mr. Atherton to

let him know of his return. Then, all being done and sitting still his lot for some hours, the rack held him once more. His torture was severe and protracted. He looked out of the window, but took in nothing that he saw. He tried to read, but could not concentrate his attention nor take the meaning of words and phrases, so that he read the same paragraph three times before he realized that it conveyed nothing to him. Then he abandoned the attempt, and gave himself up to the thoughts that tormented him. It was in vain that he told himself time would cure him of his distemper. The moment was all absorbing, and prospective ease mattered little. There were other passengers in the compartment in which he was travelling, and, his mood having somewhat changed, he dreaded lest any one of them should begin to talk to him. When the train stopped for more than a minute or two at a station, he got out and paced the platform. One of the photographs of Jane was in his pocket, but, though he longed for a sight of it, he did not look at it. When he reached home, he must lock it and its fellows up out of view and try to forget them. A better course would be to destroy them at once, but he did not expect to have the strength of mind to do that. The journey seemed endless. The song of the wheels beat upon his brain. One of Jane's songs ran beside it.

"I know and I know I 'll be happy with him,
For there are n't many boys like my little boy Jim."

The wheels took the words and played with them so that sometimes he could not get past the first three, but repeated incessantly, "I know and I know and I know and I know"; and sometimes it was "my little boy Jim" that he could not release . . .

He reached Manchester at last, and carrying his bag, which was light, he left the station and proceeded to his rooms. They looked cheerless, he thought, and unwelcoming. No one saw him go in. From a door on the opposite side of the staircase came the sound of a 'cello. It followed him dolefully into the inner room where he put down his bag. He went to the window and looked out. The quadrangle was deserted. The smoke of the city hung low in the sky. All was grey. Where were the balmy breezes and the sun that, even here in the heart of the murky town, had set his pulses leaping a few days since? He forgot the pain of their leaping.

He heard a knock at his door, and roused himself. Mr. Atherton came in. He looked eagerly at Michael's face.

"You 've come back," he began, and broke off. "Tell me," he said.

"I was too late."

"Too late, what do you mean?"

"A day after the fair. She was married — the day before yesterday."

The notes of the 'cello in dreary inaccuracy filled the silence that followed these words. Incidentally

Michael chafed for a sound that rang true, and a clear sweep of the bow on the strings.

("Sharper!" he said to himself, addressing the student in imagination. "Let yourself go. Don't be afraid of it. Now, quicker, firmer! Ah . . .!")

The sounds were appalling. Mr. Atherton shut the door, and subdued them somewhat, but could not wholly exclude them.

"You saw her?"

"Yes."

"She told you?"

Michael bowed his head.

"What did you do?"

The futile question was asked mechanically.

"There was nothing to do. There is nothing to be done. I came back."

Mr. Atherton moved a step forward, and stood still. "I — don't know what to say to you," he said in a low voice.

Michael made no answer. He was standing near a table. A penholder lay upon it. He stretched his hand for it, and began to turn and twist it idly in his fingers. The desultory action was somehow significant of his mood. As little did there appear just then to do with his life. Half unconsciously he sat down and leant his head on one hand, watching, as if they were not of his own controlling, the wanton motions of the other.

Mr. Atherton looked at him silently. He saw the clean white parting and the reflection of the light

from the window upon the dark hair. He saw the firm lines of forehead and nose, and of shaven lip and chin, and something in these things, together with Michael's attitude, caused his throat to tighten suddenly, and he turned away unable to speak.

The young man looked up at last. Mr. Atherton was gazing out of the window. He became conscious of the direction of Michael's eyes, and he turned back and met them. Neither spoke for a few moments.

"So I separated you," Mr. Atherton said at last.

Michael did not reply at once.

"I suppose it was not to be," he said, when he saw that Mr. Atherton waited. "I was almost prepared — only one is never quite prepared for anything. I could not be surprised. Fifteen months is a long time. Somehow," he laughed, "every one seemed to be telling me that in one way or another, sir, and every one seemed to have been married since I left London."

"Every one? Who, Michael?"

He recounted his experiences at New Cross.

"Mr. Cheston was married," he said in conclusion. "Mr. Sands dead, and Mrs. Sands married again. I think I almost expected to find — what I found."

His voice trembled for the first time. He had been speaking with something of the bitterness of youth in its first disappointment. Suddenly the knowledge that Jane was lost to him forever came to him as a thing fully realized, and he covered his eyes with his

hand. His habitual reserve and his control of himself and his emotions made any expression of grief notable. Since the day when, years ago, Michael's eyes had filled with tears at the parting with his master at Birmingham, Mr. Atherton had not seen him thus moved. Then he had himself been all things to his pupil. Now he did not know that, by an indirect complicity in that which had brought about the present state of matters, he might not have alienated the friend he loved so well. Hence it was that, being first impelled to put his arms about the bowed shoulders of Michael and try to comfort him as one would a child in pain, he restrained himself and stood aloof till a moment when the sight of his sorrow became more than he could bear.

"Oh," he said then, going to him and bending over him in his compassion, but keeping his hands to his side, "you must believe that I am sorry. In spite of everything, you must believe it. I would have done anything to help you when I knew that your heart was fixed, but for a long time I did n't know it, and I was wrong in my judgements. I have been instrumental in bringing about what has happened, but it has been in ignorance, and you must n't hate me for it. I can't afford to lose you, I can't lose you. You don't know what you are to me."

Michael said nothing, but, without looking up, he felt for Mr. Atherton's hand and held it.

Later in the evening he talked with less reserve than he had shown yet.

"You did n't know Jane," he said, "and I never told you. If I had . . . Why did n't I! You would have listened."

"Oh, Michael," Mr. Atherton said, "I am glad to hear you say that. I was biassed. I did n't know. If only I had talked it out with you! I was so anxious you should keep yourself free till you had looked about you and taken your bearings. There was some selfishness in my thought, for so I kept you to myself the longer, but it was not all selfishness. I thought I was helping you to save yourself from what would drag you down."

"If you had known Jane!" Michael said.

It was the refrain of their talk.

"You will stay on."

"As long as you will let me."

"That would be always, Michael."

"Where should I go? My friend is here."

He told of the craving for human sympathy that had seemed like to lead him to give confidence to a stranger.

"My poor Michael, how badly it went with you!"

The talk was interspersed with silences. There were things neither could say. Yet Michael having spoken felt comforted, and Mr. Atherton found solace in the comfort of Michael.

Long after Michael slept, for he slept that night, Mr. Atherton lay awake thinking.

Jane's letter came on the second morning after Michael's return. He had watched for it eagerly — tell-

ing himself, none the less, that it would be but a formal letter of thanks. It was nothing of the sort. All innocently it opened the wound for a time.

After thanking him warmly (in childish phrases such as he could hear her using), she went on to say:—

"You have wished me happiness so kindly that I can't help telling you how happy I am. I wanted you to know the other night about my marriage, but there was n't time and — somehow I did n't want to tell you either. I believe I even wanted to get away before you asked me. You did n't ask me much, and I was glad. I did n't seem able to talk of it. I don't know why, but I thought at first you might be vexed. I can't make what I mean any plainer and it does n't seem very plain, but it was so long since I had seen you and I was a little bit shy of you, too. The brooch is lovely. I shall always keep and value it for your sake. You can't think how glad I was to see you again. The minute I had left you, I knew there was a lot I wanted to say to you, and I was ashamed of having hurried. Curley might have waited, for I shall have him always, and I hate to think that it had to be someone else who told you whom I had married. Did they tell you at the hall? Some of them knew, of course, though it won't be in the papers this week, Curley says, because it was all done so quickly. Curley says I am to ask you to shake hands if you will, please, and not to remember that you ever had a disagreement. I know you once did n't like him. I do want you to think well of him. You would if you

knew him. You can't believe how good he is to me. He is quite changed. His mother says it is me. She and Monze have been so kind to me. I do love them both. Yes I am very very happy, and it is nice to think you will be glad. I am all the time wishing mother could know — like I was when I sang my first song at the Camberwell, and it was n't a frost. Perhaps she does. Did you think I had improved? I would have liked to do even better if I had known you were there, but I always do try, because I love it, and perhaps I am glad I did n't know, after all. Anyway, I saw you afterwards, and I shall think of that. I think 'My boy Jim' is a good song, don't you? But I shall always like 'The Lane' best. I have got on much better than I deserve. I have n't been eighteen months in the profession yet, and there are lots of girls better than me who have to wait years. Curley 's got on quick, too, has n't he? Now good-bye. Some day you must come and see us. Please think you have two friends in Lambeth, for I know Curley would like to be a friend, too, if you 'll let him."

She signed herself "Jane Merino," and added "Jenny Tandem" in brackets.

To say that Michael read her letter many times would be to understate fact. He carried it about with him, and restlessness pursued him. Mr. Atherton looked on, waiting for time to do its work of healing. He knew of the letter's coming, and expected nothing less than that it should affect its recipient in some such fashion.

But after a while he began to see a change. Life slid back gradually into the old grooves, and Michael showed a zeal for work. Then he began to work harder than before. He had apparently no longer a definite object for so working, but he seemed impelled to work. Presently another change came. The need of expression grew urgent. . . .

So Jane woke what slumbered in Michael, and in after years her poor little name might have been read through and through the score that brought him fame.

CHAPTER XXVIII

JANE in Lambeth was aglow with happiness. It illumined her like the halo of a saint. She walked upon air. Ambrosia was her food, nectar her drink. Curley was her lord and her slave and her husband and her lover. She said, "Oh, Curley" in these early days and looked into his eyes, marvelling that he belonged to her; and even Curley said, "Oh, little Jenny!" nor wearied of embracing her.

He showed a taste for domesticity that deceived even his mother — staying at home with Jane when their separate engagements permitted it, or assisting her in her artless and ingenuous marketings. He was never so content as when she was with him. They were lodging with Mrs. Kerridge, who was reorganizing her arrangements to suit their requirements. The tailor and his wife who occupied the first floor had been induced to vacate it, and the rooms were being repapered and painted, and Curley was furnishing them.

Together, in these days, Curley and Jane visited the second-hand dealers of Vauxhall and Westminster, Pimlico and Chelsea, with occasional journeyings further afield — to Marylebone and the Tottenham Court Road. Curley, on the security of the comfortable salary he was receiving, had found no difficulty in borrowing a sum of money adequate to

the occasion, nor in increasing it when, by mismanagement and an easy-going lavishness that was temperamental with him, it fell under what was required of it. Life was too short for bargaining. You took or you left.

Timid Jane heard him proudly. She stood by with shining eyes. How generous he was and magnificent. The world seemed broader. She had a place in it and a right to her place.

She had but to wish, to receive. Sometimes she held back from expressing a wish. Once he divined such a wish. No, no, she protested, the thing was too dear and an ornament only. (It was an old print of a classical subject, and her eyes had rested upon it in its gold oval frame, not for its beauty alone, — she appreciated that incompletely, — but because one of the figures, a Hermes, was like Curley.)

The price was two guineas — too much for a whim. Curley insisted. Jane should have it, he said, if the price had been ten.

He bought it at once. They carried it away with them.

"Sure you like it, little girl?"

"It's lovely."

Then she had to tell him how good he was to her, and he indulgently to slip his arm through hers and press it to his side. She was sorry when the crowded pavement forced him to release it.

"So you love me, little wife?" he said as he did so.

"Better than all the world."

Thus they talked in these days. They were strange days, and wonderful. Jane said so.

"I don't know that there's anything strange in them," said Curley.

Jane thought there was — strange and wonderful. What she meant was the marvellous thing of this happiness falling to her. Was it really to her — to Jane Smith? Not Jane Smith, little stupid! How wonderful to be Jane Merino — to bear Curley's name! (It was not Curley's real name it was true, for he had none, and she knew it, but the question of parentage had not been raised at all, and he had been married as Cuthbert Merino.) She thought Merino a beautiful name, and Cuthbert a name for heroes. And how good it was to be "straight."

"Poor Nelly Chingford!" she said under her breath.

Miss Chingford, *à propos* and by chance, came to see her that day.

"Bless the child," she said, noting Jane's radiancy. "It's heaven, is n't it? I've been there, though not p'r'aps through church doors like you. The gilt's on the ginger. You wait."

"Shut up, Nelly," said Jane, smiling, and with less diffidence than she would have shown in the old days. "My Curley's not gilt at all, he's gold through and through."

"See the wife I've got," said Curley.

"Jenny's a dove," said Miss Chingford.

"What am I, then?" said Curley, atwinkle.

Miss Chingford shook her finger at him, and took Jane in her arms.

"Oh, you're wearing dove's feathers just now," she jerked out between her kisses upon the little bride's cheek. "My fear's for the day when you drop 'em."

"What's under?" said Curley, with the smile that beguiled.

"Who knows!" said Miss Chingford.

"You'll never change," cried Jane fervently. "You'll never change, Curley, will you?"

She looked at her husband intently.

"Pinch Nelly for me," said Curley in answer, "pinch her as hard as you can. Try and hurt her. You can't. She's so tough. She's been a good time in the world, and she's getting to know just a little too much."

Miss Chingford with a wink said: "You're right — if I know you, my gentleman. Too much, did you say? Well, I think so!"

He seemed changed at all events. One or two of his friends had said, "Curley married! Oh, Lor'!"

Nelly, alone with Jane, said, "Somehow I never thought it was Curley. You remember one night when I drove you home from the Camberwell and you cried. Was it Curley then, dear?"

"No, it was n't Curley then," Jane answered slowly.

Miss Chingford said that Jane was a strange one.

"Sometimes I think so myself," said the bride.

"Everything else was a mistake. It's Curley now. It'll be Curley always."

Miss Chingford said, "That's what I fear," nor would she explain. "You seem to have got him, however," she added.

Jane was puzzled. But Curley loved her; she was sure of it. What else in the world mattered?

Miss Chingford and Curley had a word at the door. It was half seriously spoken.

"Treat her well," was the gist of it. "You've a wife in a thousand."

Curley knew that.

"Still, who wants your advice, dear?" he asked her indulgently.

"Treat her well," was the answer. "She loves the ground that you walk on. That's silly and not the way to keep you, as she'll know when she's older. But she's a child, and God made her as the Devil made you, Master Impudence. You're in luck. Treat her well."

The counsel just then appeared needless. Mrs. Kerridge, speaking of Mr. Merino, said that she never had seen so devoted a husband. Jenny's eyes filled with tears, and when Mrs. Kerridge asked why, she could only plead happiness. She had cried, Mrs. Kerridge remembered, on the night of her début, and for the same reason. Strange little Jane.

On most days one or another of the Merino family came to see her — Madame Merino, or Monze, or Perky, or Lena, or Fritz. Never was a mother-in-law

more welcome. Jane's heart went out to her. She had always liked her, and now the liking became real affection. Madame Merino had long talks with her — told her her fears and said they were modified.

"He's changed, and it's you. It was drink I was 'fraid of. His father," she lowered her voice to the whisper of confidences, "his father (he knows as his father ain't Monze and he's told you) — oh, awful! He was my agent. He's dead. But it's in the blood, so no wonder I used to be anxious. But if he's steady we need n't bother, and that's why I am so glad he's married you. You've changed him."

Jane had turned pale at the word. Drink was so dreadful. But Madame Merino declared she was anxious no longer, and Curley was living quietly.

"I've changed him," Jane said, as she wrote it to Michael. "I've changed him. Oh, is n't it wonderful!"

With Monze she fell at once into filial relations, and Curley went back to calling him Father. The day when the boy and the man had fallen out was forgotten.

Lena hung on Jane's arm and her words, and asked questions innumerable. Perky came to Petwell Street and sat silent, and Fritz devoured his sister-in-law with round eyes.

"Talk about happy families," said Mrs. Kerridge. "It's as good as a picture-book."

She and Madame Merino made friends. Mrs. Ker-

ridge had much to tell of Jane, and Madame of Curley. They got on together prodigiously.

Mrs. Kerridge had seen Madame Merino's performance, and touched on the same incidentally. Her connection with Jane had engendered a keen and a motherly interest in matters professional.

"Them summersets," she said, "how you do 'em I can't think!"

"It's habit and training," said Madame Merino, "though I'm stiffer than I were, and Monze puts on flesh a bit, too."

"Well, as we get on," said Mrs. Kerridge, "it's what some of us must expect, and no one, to look at you, would take you for the mother of a married man, I'm sure, let alone a possible granmar in time, as we hope p'r'aps you will be."

The subject (Jane had not been married a fortnight) gave matter for infinite talk. Madame Merino said it was "all according"; from a personal point of view she hoped so, she was sure; but professionally maternity gave a lot of trouble. She became reminiscent at once. Fritz, it transpired, had kept her long idle.

"On the road we was, too, at the time — I shall never forget."

Here a chance expression might have undone the work of days.

Hedgerows and ditches passed through Mrs. Kerridge's innocent mind, and her surprise showed itself on her face. Madame Merino, seeing by hazard that

her hearer was astray, and grasping, moreover, the direction even of her erring, hastened to explain that "the road" meant on tour.

"Ah, I was wondering," Mrs. Kerridge exclaimed in enlightenment.

It would have been dreadful if Jane had allied herself with people who had ever tramped. She was reassured at once, however, and relieved to be able to continue an intimacy which such a discovery would have endangered. On the road! It was enough to alarm her.

"On the road with a theatrical company," Madame Merino explained. "They were playing a panto, and it introduced our show, and Monze would n't leave me behind for all I was n't performing. Yes, a baby's lost time in the profession."

Mrs. Kerridge found some suitable rejoinder. It led back to Curley and Jane.

To see them together, she said, made her feel young again.

So in contentment and marvelling sped the early days of Jane's married life. She went about her work with limbs that were ready to dance to her heart's singing; and the hours of separation, when husband and wife went their different ways in pursuance of their individual callings, were filled for one, at least, of the two with thoughts of the other.

When Curley's first ardour cooled off, Jane was still too happy to observe any diminishment. Her happiness seemed cumulative, like heat. She had

enough stored in her to carry her on for a time, and two months went by in a dream. She did not see nor guess the instability of the thing in which her well-being was centred. She appeared to have forgotten her doubts and the days when she had contrasted Curley with Michael. She was cheated and blinded by loving and the semblance of love.

Domesticity palled upon Curley at length. He began to wish for variety. It was inevitable. Nelly Chingford had known how things would fall out — was telling, perhaps, if not in so many words, on the occasion of the visit that has been recorded. Jane was blind as a bat, and a dear little fool, might God bless her!

In her brusque way Miss Chingford could have lifted up her voice in prophecy. She knew Curley's type pretty accurately. When passion was dead, what would there be left? There must be souls for a union of souls, and Curley had only a body. Jane did not know that just yet, but in time she would know it, and then — God and Woman pity her!

Jane, then, ignorant of what (by reason of her choice and her consequent love) was before her, lived still in ecstasy. When Curley wanted amusing, she collected scraps of news and gossip for him and brought them to him as a bird that gathers food for its young. She wished to wait upon him hand and foot. Gradually he allowed her to do so, but that was an added joy. To sew and to mend for him, to brush his clothes and to fold them, to mark his linen and darn his hose,

were delights in themselves. Many a thing did she kiss as she touched it. Some day, who knew, there would be other things to do. She smiled at the thought and fell into reverie. Her fingers would be at work on tiny garments — some day, perhaps, or perhaps never. Meanwhile there was no one but Curley . . .

CHAPTER XXIX

STANDING one day at one of the bars of the music-hall at which The Three C's were performing, and contemplating the charms of a girl of considerable personal attractions who, with another only a shade less alluring, presided over it, Curley asked himself why he had married.

The barmaid understood play with her eyelids, looked from under them, lowered them suddenly. She was twenty-five, perhaps, had black locks and a shade on her lip.

Curley said, "Another Scotch, please," partly for the pleasure of touching her fingers with his as she gave him the glass, and again as he gave her the money, and yet again as she gave him the change. She laughed in his eyes after that.

They talked intermittently. He watched her as she attended to customers. Now she was measuring brandy or whiskey, and tossing it into a tumbler with one hand as she put the metal stopper back into the decanter with the other. Now, with her head held a little to one side and her face unconcerned, she was opening soda water. (Jane, when she did that at home, wore an anxious expression always to be justified by the copious splash on the carpet if not by the report of the cork as it flew.) Here the bottle

went straight to the glass with a faint clink, and small wasting or none. How nimble the white fingers that sped from one thing to another! The empty bottle was scarcely slipped by them into the mysterious receptacle under the counter before they were busy again. They could fight, too, with wires or corks that were stubborn, and they grasped the ivory handles with a firmness suggestive of strength when the call was for beer.

Half unconsciously Curley was drawing comparisons. Strength and independence and generous proportions seemed attractive just then. Watching this woman, exchanging a smile with her from time to time, as he met a look from the tail of her eye, Curley, his glass in his hand and the music of the hall in his ears, and the bustle of it about him, fell into thought. He had been married six months. He was barely twenty-two, and had bound himself. Why?

The best years of his life were before him.

As he stood at the bar, a man whom he knew came and joined him.

"You've got to drink with me, young 'un," the newcomer said, when the two had greeted each other. "There's something to drink to, my boy; I'm going to be married."

The six months' husband looked at his acquaintance, and called him a fool.

"It's drinking to folly," he said.

This speech came in due course to the ears of the friends who had laughed on hearing the news of his

marriage, and they laughed anew. It was as they expected.

When Curley's acquaintance was gone, he went back to his study of the barmaid. She had turned in an interval of leisure to the looking-glass at the back of the bar, and was arranging her hair. Her attitude with both hands raised to her head threw out the lines of her figure boldly. She met Curley's eyes in the glass, and they beckoned her to him.

He gave her a rose from his coat.

"May you?" she said, for she knew who he was.

"Never mind," said Curley.

"What would — some one say?" asked she of the bar.

"Never mind," said Curley.

But something of compunction he had, and the thing made him angry.

So he thought of Jane in the light of a hindrance, and into his manner towards her there crept an element of impatience.

This the little wife bore patiently, not realizing at first its full import. But the fact that she sought good reasons — a hundred — to account for it to herself, and to excuse it, showed that she felt it.

Anyway, she told herself this and she told herself that, trying even to be persuaded that just then she was over-sensitive. It was true that at this time she wished to be blinded, perhaps. She was suffering a disappointment. She was not to have the little garments to work on, after all, and could make her en-

gagements ahead. She was perfectly frank, and told Mr. Paton, her agent, in plain terms the fact and how sorry she was. In arranging her affairs there was, alas, no reason to consider the future.

"I'm dreadfully sorry," she said.

"We can book into next year, then," he said; "that's right, you're uncommonly lucky. Look at some. There's Florry Lipton (Mrs. Isaacson she is — you know), 'resting' for the second time in less than two years. There's the youngest Sister Tinker, she *ought* to be — now. A reg'lar misfortune, I call it, and such an inconvenience to an agent. You think yourself lucky, dear. Merino he'll be glad enough, I'll lay."

Jane did not know. Curley had said something of the sort himself, but she had wanted to give him a son. More than ever did she wish it when the impatient note sounded. Perhaps she was disappointing him! That thought was disturbing.

Curley, in point of fact, shared Mr. Paton's opinion. He did not, however, give the subject much consideration at all. He wasted as a rule little time in thinking.

The debt for the furniture of the new rooms was being paid off by monthly instalments. He grumbled a little at that. Why had they not moved into furnished rooms? Jane had not wanted to leave Mrs. Kerridge. Curley said one old woman was the same as another. Jane did not answer, but she determined to put by what she could of her own earnings towards

the sum that had still to be found. As it was, she spent most of her money indirectly on her husband. She would have lived on plain food, but Curley liked dainties. Her expenses were not inconsiderable. Still money came easily and pleasantly. She undertook a little more work than she need otherwise have done, but what matter?

Now Curley, if he was hasty at times, neither brooded nor sulked. The troubles which poor little Jane was to face were to come of her love for him. A wife of a type more resembling his own might, perhaps, have escaped suffering altogether. Curley's wife should have gone her own way. Nelly Chingford would have known how to deal with him — she or another of fibre as strong. Jane was tender and dependent. Having given herself to Curley, she must needs love him wholly. It mattered little that chance or fate had ordained that it was Curley who was to be her husband, for Jane had the nature that loves. She would have loved Michael as absorbingly had she married him. She had come near to loving him once — perhaps, even had loved him, but Curley had married her and taught love's mysteries; so, of her temperament, she had to love Curley. Therein was Jane's tragedy. She had built upon sand.

The fault lay, perchance, in her choice, if a choice she had had. Curley, it may be said, could no more help being like sand than Michael like rock. The men were of different stuff.

Be this as it may, the rain descended and the floods

came and began to beat upon the house of Jane's happiness.

Curley looked about him. His fancy for Jane had lulled him to sleep; he was waking.

The halls laughed at ties and sung Freedom. They sung Constancy, too, and much that was moral conventionally — Domesticity, let us say, the "dear chimney corner," and so on; Courage: the fireman saving a child was sure of applause, and so was a mention of lifeboats; Martial Ardour: forlorn hopes were popular; Patriotism: to allude to the Flag or the Honour of England was to bring down any respectable house. These things they sung and many more, monumentally noble. Sentiment they sung and false sentiment, too. But they sung Freedom loudest.

Jane herself, scarcely comprehending, had sung to Levity (at least) in more than one song that had been written for her. It would not have occurred to her to apply the precepts of her songs to conduct at all. Some of Nelly Chingford's patter had shocked her a little at first, but it made people laugh, and she supposed there was n't much harm in it. She had, indeed, become so used to hearing lax maxims and to pursuing her own way uprightly the while, as if guided by texts from the Scriptures, that she held what was sung of little account. Why, drink was sung and drunkenness. No one would take the counsel of drinking-songs seriously. Such was Jane's view.

Jane was Jane, though, and Curley was Curley. For him, the voice of the halls (in his ears from the

cradle) had not failed of impression. He held conjugal laxity matter for jesting — or, maybe, no matter at all. Yet his irritability at this time was due to the presence of a compunction of sorts in him, and Jane suffered for his fidelity. The conscience of Curley, however, worked curiously. It granted him strange indulgences, and absolved him in ways that were wonderful. The discovery that Monze was not his father had allowed him to leave the troupe without a misgiving. His emancipation from Jane was excused on grounds more illogical still. So flimsy, indeed, was his justification, that one would have thought that he need not have troubled himself.

Jane, as we know, received letters from unknown admirers, and occasional presents of flowers and bonbons and fruit. Curley knew it, of course. She had long since told him how much at first they had harassed and frightened her. She showed them to him, and he treated them lightly. Of her own feeling she would have been for sending the offerings back, but she had learnt that as an "artist" she was expected to keep them, and since the little diamond lizard with the ruby eyes there had reached her nothing of such value as to cause her trepidation.

A basket of roses, a note, and a few chance words let fall by Miss Alfie Le Roy, and reaching Curley through Jane, in whose innocent mind they were rankling, were the indirect means of providing him with such a sop to his conscience as that extraordinary example of mentors required.

Jane, all guileless as she was, knew as well as another the signs of conquest. She could single out, from as much of a house as she could see, such people as paid her the attention that in past days was called ogling, and a young man, who at this time dropped nightly into a particular stall at the hall at which she was doing her ten o'clock turn, and followed her movements with bold eyes, had not escaped her notice. He came just before her number went up (she had seen him arrive), and he left, she believed, as soon as her songs were over.

So when one evening a basket of roses was brought to her, without message or card, she was able to guess who had sent them. With her usual timidity she was doubtful whether to be pleased or alarmed.

Miss Le Roy, who happened to pass in as Jane was passing out, stopped to admire them, and turned the scale for her. What she said was:—

"Well, you're to be pitied, I don't think!" (and spoke sweetly). "What with mashes sending you three-guinea bouquets and a husband who don't mind into the bargain, *you* can't complain of your luck."

"They're pretty, are n't they?" said Jane, but she flushed instantly. She had never a retort on her tongue, and Miss Alfie's pleasantry was bitter, unanswered.

She went back troubled to Lambeth. The flowers were beautiful, but any pleasure she might have felt in them was poisoned.

She and Curley for that night (and the sake of a

bird that had been sent them) were supping at home. Jane came in first. She put the flowers down on a table near the hearth, and they filled the room with their scent. While she waited for her husband, she examined them. As she did so something white caught her eye. A note was amongst them. She was about to take it out when she heard Curley's foot on the stairs, and a moment later he opened the door and strode in. It was significant of the subtle change that had come over their relations that she did not fly to his arms, but looked at him, seeking her cue from his face. It was passive. She ached for the kiss that she would not admit to herself was wittingly omitted. She went into elaborate reasonings to show herself why it had not been given. He had a cigar in his mouth. She had not been near the door when he came in. He was hungry, and wanted his supper. Nor would she allow herself to hear what her head had to tell her in answer. Her heart's peace was too closely at stake.

Mrs. Kerridge herself, as well as tempestuous Gladys, appeared with the dishes. She announced that the pheasant smelt lovely, and she hoped would "eat tender."

She looked at Curley for approbation as she took off the cover, but he made no comment, and began to carve in silence.

Mrs. Kerridge shook her head as she went downstairs. She, too, was beginning to be conscious of changes, and could admit it.

Jane kept nothing to herself, and soon had told Curley of the present of flowers; he glanced at them casually and went on with his supper.

"There 's a note amongst them," she said, "but I have n't looked at it yet. I believe I know who they 're from."

She mentioned the man in the stalls, and presently had related Miss Alfie Le Roy's little bitter-sweet comments. To these things at the moment Curley paid small attention. He was occupied with his supper. The pheasant was excellent, so was the bottled beer he was drinking. Under the combined influences of the two, he relaxed somewhat and Jane's spirits rose. She ventured to kiss him when she brought him his pipe.

They drew their chairs round to the fire. The basket of roses was very near Curley then, and he stretched out his hand and pulled it towards him. The flowers were exquisite, full to the core and richly fragrant. The note lay under the leaves. Curley came upon it just as Jane had done, and threw it to her. She had forgotten it.

"See what he says," he said.

She opened and read it. As she took in its purport, a colour rose to her cheeks.

"I wish they would n't," she said hotly. "I hate getting these things. They 're insults."

She was married now. People knew or should know it.

She handed the letter to Curley, who read it.

"To wear one of his roses to-morrow night if I'll meet him!" she murmured under her breath. She put her palms to her cheeks.

Curley raised his eyes from the paper, and regarded her contemplatively.

"Well, you've knocked him," he said, and was silent for a few moments.

A coal fell noisily from the fire into the fender, where it lay throwing out jets of smoke. Curley took the tongs absently and replaced it.

"You do get some love-letters," he said then.

Jane did not move. The flush was slowly leaving her face. She was wondering by what right every coxcomb who had a few coins to jingle in his pocket or to buy flowers addressed her. She saw herself as a thing each one thought he might buy.

She looked at the roses.

"I wish I had n't touched them," she said. "I've never liked getting things. I've always felt something was expected in return. A note like this shows it. It puts sense into what Alfie Le Roy said. I can't bear that anything can be said, however untrue it is, and she said something when she saw my diamond lizard."

"Nonsense," said Curley. "She's jealous. It shows you're successful. So you are. And perhaps she's not so far wrong when she says you're lucky. You get these presents and love-letters and things, don't you?"

"I wish I did n't."

"But you get them."

She sighed.

"Yes, they come."

"It's because men fall in love with you—and you make them. You can't help it, perhaps, but you do."

He seemed to be pressing a point. She looked at him for explanation.

"So Alfie Le Roy's quite right," he said. "There's lots of husbands would cut up rough about it. But I let you do as you like."

He caught her grave face in his hands and shook her and kissed it. She was a child and a plaything.

Jane laughed in happy response to his caress, but it was not wholly a moment for laughter had she known it.

"You see, you can trust me," she whispered contentedly.

He waved that aside, and, without knowing why, she felt chilled.

"I never question you," he said. "You come and go as you like. I leave you free as the air."

And that was the way in which Curley said Corban.

CHAPTER XXX

NOT many months later any one who had been able to observe Jane closely would have seen a flagging of her energies that was altogether unnatural to her age and her temperament. She was pale and inert. She would sit for long spells unoccupied except in thought. At the sound of an approaching footfall, however, she would be alert in a moment, and Mrs. Kerridge, who suspected these lonely musings, rarely caught sight of them.

"What does she do by herself all so quiet?" the good woman queried. "She used to be singing all day. Now there 's never a sound unless it 's a note or two of the pianna broke off at once, like as if the 'eart was n't in her for music. And what does 'e mean by it to leave her alone?"

There was plenty to wonder at and to grieve over, too. Mr. Curley was constantly out — out by day, out by night, and the premonitory note or notice in the latter case had long since been dispensed with. When Jane got the first message (a pencilled line on a card) announcing that he might be late and not to wait up for him, she had been neither anxious nor depressed. She had waited for about an hour before going to bed, and then had kept vigil for perhaps another; but no doubt of him had assailed her. Cur-

ley was in and asleep when she woke, and she looked for his waking to tell him how much she had missed him. Afterwards Jane dated things from that time and called it the beginning. He was delightful that day, and made her a present in the shape of a fan of curled feathers. Later, and by the light of subsequent events, she came to know that such gifts, and he gave her many, were not without sinister meaning. Sometimes they were peace-offerings, sometimes confessions (if he was in good temper), sometimes unblushing avowals.

But the fan was the first of them, and Jane thought: "My Curley. How generous! He's always thinking of others" — words that came to be true before long, though not quite in the sense in which she employed them.

Her disillusionment was not slow. An anonymous letter informed her of certain attentions to a barmaid. "Find out what he does with his Sundays," ran a line in it.

He had been out once or twice lately on that day of the week. Jane would not question him. The letter had come on a Wednesday. Three days and a half of suspense followed. The last thing on Saturday night he said: "I shan't be in to dinner to-morrow."

Jane was out of suspense.

"You won't be in to dinner," she said mechanically; and Curley said, "No."

She forced back her tears. He should not see them. No one should see them.

Madame Merino and Lena came to see her, it chanced, the next day.

"Curley 'll be sorry to miss you," she said, more than once. "I expect him in every minute. He 's only gone to see a friend of his — I forget who he said. I like him to go, you know."

"He 's such a one for friends," said Madame Merino.

"He 's so popular," said loyal little Jane, "and you can't be surprised, can you? I do think I 'm a lucky girl, don't you?"

"I don't know but what it 's Curley that 's lucky," said the young man's mother.

Jane held that the luck was hers.

"Look what some husbands are," she said, and instanced one or two.

Jane talked in this vein. She talked thus to Mrs. Kerridge as well. No one should know. But the thing was an effort.

Madame Merino and Lena left that day without seeing Curley.

Lena at parting commented upon his non-appearance.

"I hope he 's in no mischief, I 'm sure," she said sagely; "but Jenny must n't worry, must she, mother? You never can tell with Curley; you never could. He 'd used to stay out just like this at home, did n't he?"

"He gets talkin', you know," said Madame Merino to Jane, ignoring her daughter; "that 's what it is.

Well, I'm sorry not to have seen him, as you'll tell him, my dear, when he comes in. You give him too much freedom, I expect."

"Ah, but you can't hold Curley," said Lena, "that's what I say. He's got to be given his way, or he'll take it."

Madame Merino looked at her daughter sharply.

"What do you know about what you can do and what you can't do, Miss Impidence? You wait till you're asked."

Lena was unabashed.

"I know Curley pretty well," she said. "He comes and goes as he likes. And what's more, he never tells you where he's been."

Jane wanted to protest that Curley told her everything, and was beginning to say something of the sort when Madame Merino cut her short.

"Lena," she said, "is a deal too fond of the sound of her own voice, as I've told her times and times, and well she knows. It'd be a fat sight better, I say, if she was to speak when she's spoken to, and then p'r'aps some of us might now and again listen to her opinion, which we don't do when gave unasked."

Jane, for fear Mrs. Kerridge might waylay her visitors and give her own report of Curley's ongoings, accompanied her mother-in-law and Lena to the door.

"He'll be so vexed to have missed you," she said again, "and I expect him in every minute."

She went back to her room with lagging steps.

What was Curley doing? She sat down by the fire, and her hands, a little thinner in the last few weeks, fell into her lap.

She sat for a long time without moving, and the fire sunk low in the grate and the room grew dark . . .

It was about a week after this that a young woman Jane passed in the street looked at her curiously. Something in the woman's demeanour arrested Jane's attention. She was tall and dark and well developed, and had a shade on her upper lip. Simultaneously Jane and she turned round and looked after each other. Their eyes met. Neither looked away at once, and Jane remembered the face afterwards.

Three months later Jane met her again. This time the stranger stopped.

"I know who you are, Mrs. Merino," she said, "but you don't know who I am."

Jane said, "I can guess," and grew paler.

"I want to tell you," said the young woman, "that it is n't me now, and that I 'm in hell — if that 's any satisfaction to you."

She looked at Jane narrowly.

"I 'm more passionate than you, perhaps."

"Perhaps," said Jane.

"You can't be suffering as much as I am. You 've nothing to reproach yourself with. Feel my hand. I 'm burning. But you would n't touch it, perhaps."

"I don't mind touching it," said Jane.

The woman looked surprised.

"Don't you want to kill me?" she said.

Jane shook her head.

"I wish I was dead," said the woman.

There was a moment or two of silence, and then they separated awkwardly, and each went her way.

Jane held back her tears. Her breast was heaving. More passionate? Was she? Suffer more? Could she?

"I 'm his wife," said Jane. "I wear his ring. I bear his name. Nobody can take that from me."

She sang unsteadily the ensuing night.

Alfie Le Roy met her at the wings.

"You 're not well, dear, I 'm afraid. Your husband ought to make you take a rest. But perhaps he 's too busy to notice."

Jane had no answer ready.

What did it matter, after all?

"I 'm his wife," she said to herself all the way home, "his wife, his wife, his wife. No one can undo that."

But were they beginning to know? No one should know. She doubled her efforts at dust-throwing.

"Don't come next Sunday," she would say to Madame Merino, "for Curley and I won't be in." Or, "I can't come round on Wednesday, for I promised Curley I'd wait in for him."

Nelly Chingford looked at her questioningly sometimes. Jane maintained a bold front.

"Of course I 'm disappointed not to have a child," she said one day, as if she alluded to the only cloud

upon her happiness; "but one can't have everything, and Curley's never said a word. You don't know how good he is."

Nor was he, indeed, unkind. He pursued his way with even temper enough, except when his face wore the flush that Jane had learnt to know and to dread. Pining and hungering as she was for his love, there was a night when she had fled from his embraces, recognizing, in a look that enveloped her cruelly, the Curley of the incident by the hoardings.

The flush was becoming more frequent. Jane held her breath sometimes and prayed. But the gods were far off. They were impotent, or indifferent, or malignant. Jane suffered bravely.

But she had consoling moments.

When Curley slept beside her, she wound her arms round him (with care not to wake him) and took solace from his mere propinquity. He was so beautiful when he slept. The dawn round the edges of the blind, grey as the light was, could not throw ugly shadows about his face. Often, as she kissed his lips, she was able to tell herself that she was not unhappy at all; and she looked for the sleep that gave him to her, thought of it by day, and pined if the night did not bring him to her.

No one should know.

Her one great fear was that he would leave her entirely. She knew the indifference with which he regarded the ties that bound him to her. She herself was learning to look at life more broadly. What if a

day came when she should find herself alone? By contrast with such awful case, her present case was paradise. She had him to kiss in his sleep.

Oh, she was happy. It was not true that she felt neglected and wretched, and that people looked at her as at one to be pitied. Nothing was true but that she was the wife of the beautiful Curley Merino.

She wrote to Michael again.

"I have n't many people to write to," ran her letter, "and I know you will like to know how I am getting on, at least, I think so. I am quite an old married woman now. Curley and me are still with Mrs. Kerridge. We might have moved into bigger rooms, for both of us draw a good bit more than we did, but should n't like to leave Mrs. Kerridge, who has been a good friend to me, and knew mother. It is nice to be with some one who cares for you, and I have been very lucky. I gave myself a treat yesterday. It was to go and see The Three C's at the Canterbury, a thing I can't often do. I had an hour to spare, and that was the way I spent it — which looks, after this length of time, as if I had n't had enough of my husband even yet. I felt proud of him, and when they clapped him, I had to sit back in the box for fear they should see how near I was to crying for happiness. Does n't this speak well for us both?"

But she did not say how Curley had come home, some two hours after the performance, on unsteady legs, and thick of speech, and how, as she wrote, she bore on her shoulder a mark of strange colour. She

managed to arrange her dress so as to conceal it. No one should know. That was her cry and her prayer.

A week of great happiness, however, did, indeed, follow this incident. Curley was genuinely penitent and ashamed, and for seven days he devoted himself to Jane with a sincerity that renewed her hope. Willingly would she have paid a dearer price for so great a joy.

Her tongue was loosed.

"I did n't mind," she said. "I did n't mind — not one bit. You did n't mean it. There 's only one thing I ever should mind."

"What 's that?"

"Am I to tell you?"

"Yes."

"If you stopped loving me."

Curley lifted her bodily from the ground and carried her over to the looking-glass. There were tears in her eyes, but she was smiling.

"Look at that," he said.

"Well?"

"Do you think I shall stop loving anything as pretty as that?"

"Oh, if I could believe you!" said Jane.

She leant back with her head on his shoulder and laid her cheek against his. He pressed his own to it, and then turned his face till his lips could reach it, and he kissed her before he set her down. For that moment, at least, he was hers. The woman who had

confessed herself in hell, and the others, whoever they were and whatever their state, could not rob her of that nor of Curley's name.

Michael's answer came in the midst of this period of happiness which was being voushsafed to her. It was such a letter as any friend might have written, and Jane, reading it, little knew how her own had shaken and buffeted the writer. Michael, too, could put on a bold front.

But Curley was Curley, and Jane saw him slip from her as before, and less gradually. The fear grew with her that he would leave her. She could bear anything, she thought, if she might kiss him in his sleep.

She had refused some good offers from the country, and Curley said, "Why?" when she told him.

"Oh, I don't want to leave home," she said. "Who's going to look after you if I go North?"

"Don't bother about me," said Curley. "I shall be all right. And I may be going myself, a bit later on."

Jane's heart sank.

"Going!"

"Depends on my partners," said Curley shortly.

CHAPTER XXXI

IT was not very long after this that the blow fell. Jane had come in one day from a tedious rehearsal, and was feeling dispirited and weary. Oppression was in the air, and a sombre sky seemed to presage disaster. There was nothing to do for the moment, and she sat down by the window and looked out. From her place she could just see the archway where once she had stood with Michael. Was it there that she had reached the parting of the ways? She would not follow out this thought, but she knew dimly that fate had dallied with her as if in doubt whether to take her this way or that. She had been shown the path of love and suffering; the other path to which fate had seemed like to guide her was, maybe, a path of love and peace.

She fell into reverie; she may have fallen into semi-slumber, for her start was painful when the door opened suddenly and Curley came in.

"I've something to tell you," he said. "You won't like it, I'm afraid, but when you come to think you'll see it's a very good thing."

"What is it?" Jane said.

Then Curley, who never troubled himself to keep her advised of his prospective arrangements, told her the thing that she most feared to hear. He was going away. As one of the Three C's he had signed

for a six months' tour in America. Jane received the news with a momentary suspending of her heart's beating.

"Six months!" she said.

She grew white to the lips, and the walls of the room approached her, and the floor appeared to upheave, and the ceiling to flicker like firelight shadows.

She herself was booked at this period for two thirds of a year ahead, and if Curley went he went without her.

"When do you go?" she said at last.

"In three weeks."

He must have known, then, for some time.

The drab day was justified of its drabness.

Curley said lightly that six months were gone before you could look about you, and spoke of what he was to receive. The money seemed to Jane of small account, and the separation that was coming would not be measured by months. She knew instinctively that this parting would bear issue in determining her future and his. Curley had but to leave her to feel himself wholly free.

But the thing was done. She did not murmur.

She cried sometimes when there was no one to see her. She would check her tears suddenly, and force her lips and her eyes to smile if any one she knew came upon her. She cried many a night while Curley slept. He slept peacefully, suffering nothing by reason of the coming separation. She whispered to

him while he slept, telling him all her love and all her pain. At a stir she was silent.

Madame Merino looked grave, and her fat face showed lines.

"I wish you was going with him, my dear," she said to Jane. "He ought to arrange as you should go at the same time, or else give it up. I don't like to see young couples parted so soon."

"Oh, he's right to go," said Jane. "It's a splendid chance."

"I'm afraid for him, too, I tell y'," Madame Merino said to herself, but she did not say it to Jane.

Jane, after the first shock, had taken her line naturally, as a vessel rights herself when the wave has washed over her. Curley should go happily. No one need guess the fear that assailed her. When people spoke of her prospective loneliness, she made light of it. Mrs. Kerridge gave her most trouble. All artists, Jane explained to her (when they married in the profession), married in the knowledge that their engagements were liable to take them to opposite sides of the globe. America was n't far, after all. People crossed many times in a year. Managers went to look round, stopping sometimes no more than a fortnight. "Pros" went there gladly, and doubled their salaries.

She laid stress, in her explanations, on the importance of the projected tour.

"New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago — they 're going to all those, and fancy seeing so much of the world. It would have been nice," she said in con-

clusion, "if I could have gone at the same time, but I would n't have him refuse anything on my account."

Mrs. Kerridge remained under certain definite impressions, nevertheless.

"Though there 's partings in every life," she said encouragingly. "Look at the Atwells — apart six weeks in their first year when he was in 'orspital with his eye; and, again, me and Kerridge — apart for a twelvemonth, but that was when he knocked me about, and I had to get what they call a judicious separation. Well, in the end, it drawed us together."

Jane hastened to change the subject.

She went her way courageously. All she allowed herself to show was such sorrow as might naturally be expected on the part of a young wife about to be divided for a period from her husband. The heart-sickness that came of conviction and sure apprehension she hid, as fair and brave women have hidden a cancer.

These were last days, and last days should be memorable. She sped to and from her work that she might be at hand if Curley by happy chance needed her. He came and he went as he would, Jane never questioning, but always grateful if he paid her a little attention. She went once to Battersea Park to see again the spot where he had waited for her. He had loved her then, wished for her, pleaded. She went once to Camberwell to view the place where he had first revealed himself to her, and where subsequently

he had shown himself changed. How was she to have known then the true from the seeming! She could not know. She had been meant to love Curley and loved him.

The day for departure drew near, nearer, was here. It seemed but a few days since the first vague fear that he might leave her had come to disturb her. Time did not stand still.

The good-byes began early with Monze and Perky and Lena and Fritz. Madame Merino and Jane were going down to Southampton to see the last of him. Nelly Chingford turned up at Waterloo, intending there to wish him and his colleagues godspeed, but Jane's expression decided her to accompany the party bound for Southampton. Perky ran and got a ticket for her, and Jane pressed her hand when she found her taking her place in the railway carriage.

"It 's good of you, Nelly," she whispered.

The going down was uneventful. There was a great deal of hopeful talk. America was an unconquered continent to Camden and Carson, as to Curley. Anecdotes flew round, opinions, conjectures. Nelly was appealed to. She had visited the States, and had experiences to relate. Curley was ready to bet this and that. He looked like an excited schoolboy. Nelly, observing Jane, kept the talk going. Jane tried to be of good cheer with the rest. The time for sentiment was not yet.

But at Southampton she plucked up courage to speak aside to Camden, the eldest C.

"Oh, look after him," she said. "Look after him. The best husband a girl ever had . . . Bring him back to me. I shall be counting the days . . ."

Nelly seized the same opportunity for a word in the ear of Curley.

"You never deserved her," she said. "You never will, for you always were a young devil. Look here, when you get over there, be good to her — you know what I mean. I 'm not much for preaching, am I? But just think sometimes of the little wife that 's waiting for you at home. She 's as plucky as they make 'em. She never says a word — never has — but do you think I don't know?"

"There is n't much you don't, dear," said Curley.

The twinkle in his eye was not to be resisted, and Miss Chingford smiled, but she sighed, too.

Over these last hours and minutes Jane felt the air of finality that was not to be mistaken. In vain every one talked of six months — in vain she herself and the others. Her widowhood was beginning.

Nelly linked arms with her.

"We 're just going to enjoy ourselves while he 's away," she said; "ain't we, Jenny? We 're not going to grieve or bother ourselves. There is n't a man living that 's worth it."

"There 's Curley," said Jane, smiling through her tears.

Her face was like a flower washed with dew, and Nelly saw and wondered how Curley could be Curley.

Madame Merino also spoke to one of her son's partners on the subject of his welfare.

"We've never gone to America ourselves, as I said in the train," she said, by way of introduction, and speaking as if the Family were accustomed to receive and reject offers from the land of the Stars and Stripes yearly. "We seem to like home best. But it's a fine place, I'm told, and a lot o' money in it. You might have an eye on that boy o' mine now and again, will y'? There's a deal of drinkin' done there, I've heard say, and I need n't tell you drink plays the mischief in our line."

The time at Southampton sped like a fleeting dream. The moment of parting approached. Those who were staying behind had to return to London. Three or four persons who were about to travel back to town by the same train were saying good-bye to their friends.

Was any one saying it to a husband or a lover who in a week would forget? Was any one going back to so lonely a home? Jane thought of the rooms in Lambeth void of Curley, and she thought of her work. In a few hours she would be singing . . .

A few hours . . .

Let her grasp this moment. It was hers. Curley was beside her. They had not taken him yet. Let her look at him once more that afterwards she might remember him. The sun loved his eyes and his hair. His skin was fresh and clear as her own. Oh, beautiful Curley! Oh, dear and beautiful Curley, who was leaving her!

"Come back to me," she whispered. "Oh I know, Curley, I've always known — at least, I've known for some time, but I can bear it if you come back to me."

"Dear little wife," Curley whispered indulgently. "Why do you love me so much?"

"Because I married you."

That truly was the reason.

"It would be better if you had n't."

Jane shook her head.

"I would n't change," she said.

Something of remorse smote Curley.

"I'm not worth it," he said; 'you'd have done better to marry somebody else and love him."

"I did n't, though," Jane said. Her tears choked her for a moment or two after that.

"There," Curley said, "there," as one who would comfort a child. "It's only for six months."

"You'll come back?"

"Of course I shall."

"You'll come back to me. Promise me. Promise me."

"I promise."

"I'd like to say," Jane said at the last, "whatever happens . . . whatever you've done (Oh, Curley, you see I know you) . . . I shall be wanting you. It may n't be right, it may show what a poor-spirited thing I am, but it'll be true. I shall be wanting you — waiting for you. That's me, Curley. It's the way I'm made, and I can't help it. I'd like you to know, that's all. Good-bye."

"I've been a brute to you. Wait till I come back. I'll never be again. You'll see."

"Never mind. You'll come back."

He kissed her, holding her closely. They were of the people. Neither of them cared who might see.

Nelly Chingford caught her lip between her teeth, and looked away. When she turned, her eyes were dimmed and brightened, too, with the tears that stood in them.

Curley whispered again. He seemed impelled to say what Jane wished to hear.

"Jenny, whatever I do, I love you. I love you better than any one else."

He meant it, poor Curley.

Jane tightened her hold on his hand.

"That's all I want," she said.

Then the last kiss was given, and the last straining handshake, and presently Jane was on her way home — to wait for him.

CHAPTER XXXII

JANE got through the evening somehow. Her heart was with Curley on the sea, but she controlled her face and her voice, and only broke down when her duties were over. It did not matter then. The night was her own to weep out if she would.

Nelly Chingford came round to see her early in the morning, and rallied her good-naturedly on the state of her eyelids.

"Why, think," she said, "there's everything to look forward to."

Jane nodded, and smiled tearfully, saying, "I know."

"His letters," said Nelly, "for one thing"; and broke off as she thought of his nature and Jane's. "Not," she said quickly, "that I'd get watching the post, if I were you, for he may n't have much leisure for writing. I had n't, myself, in the States. There's always something you must be doing or seeing. But look forward, anyways, dear, look forward."

"I'll try to," said Jane.

She did, and set her eyes resolutely on the future. But she watched the post, despite Nelly's advice, and letters from Curley came sparsely.

"He's so busy," she said to Mrs. Kerridge, "and he never liked writing."

"You're busy, too," Mrs. Kerridge ventured to say, "and you write reg'lar, I know."

"Oh, I'm different," said Jane. "I'm a woman. It comes natural to a woman to write."

Mrs. Kerridge shook her head. She may have had views of her own upon Curley's comparative silence. She did not insist on expressing them.

She smoothed out her apron.

"Ah, well," she said, "no news is good news, they say, and his time'll be up before long, and that 's one good job. But I wish we could get a bit of colour in y'r cheeks, dear, against he does come back."

Jane protested that her paleness was normal.

"I never had a high colour," she said gravely.

"Still there 's mediums," said Mrs. Kerridge.

Jane took more exercise after that. It should not be thought she was pining. Her looks reflected on Curley. She rose early to walk on the Embankment where the air of the river was fresh and blew strongly. Almost she could fancy it blew up from the sea, and she inhaled it deeply, and went to the glass when she came in. She was glad when the wind was sharp, and made her cheeks tingle. She rubbed them sometimes with her hands.

Four months passed, and five. The time was speeding. But a sixth of it remained. Jane's expression grew eager. Would Curley come back, after all! Oh, if he did! His last words had been to tell her he loved her. Had her misgivings been needless? Oh, if it could but be so! Let her think of her luck. Luck had

followed her surely. To few was success granted so soon. Perhaps, indeed, he would come back as he had promised.

Suspense for a space was her position.

Madame Merino came to her for news. Jane had none to give, and reluctantly said so.

"I hope he 's kep' steady," said Madame Merino. "He don't trouble me much with letters — me, nor yet you."

"Oh, there 've been a good many," said Jane, "when you come to count up."

She changed the subject, asking for Lena, who had sprained her foot and was taking an enforced rest.

"She 'll be about again in a day or two. I 'm not worryin' about her. I made sure you 'd have had a letter — or maybe I did n't. But why can't the boy write ? "

Madame Merino spoke crossly, and Jane knew she was anxious.

Jane grew pale again. It was against hope that she was hoping, and knew it while she combated the knowledge.

A line on a postcard came then. Curley wrote to say that, perhaps, he might not be home quite as soon as he had expected.

"He 's not coming," said Madame Merino when she heard of it. "I know his 'Perhapses.'"

But Jane did not join in condemning him.

So Camden and Carson came back without him — came back shaking their heads. The tale was soon

told. He had sat as loosely to them as to the old Merino Family ("or to me," thought Jane in her heart, "or to me") — and had joined an American troupe.

His late partners wished them joy of him.

"Why, it's not safe," Camden said darkly. "You never know that he may n't let you slip. One night at 'Frisco he nearly killed himself. As near as no matter. I never saw such a save."

There were other tales to tell, and some of them reached Jane, and she forced back her tears as before. He wrote more and more seldom, and meagrely. He had bettered himself, so much he vouchsafed to her, and twice sent her money which she laid by for him. She might have gone in search of him after a time, but — she knew that he was not alone. Had she not known, when she bade him good-bye, that the separation would not be measured by months?

She stayed, and she waited, and worked. She earned a good deal. As time went on, there were those who supposed she was stingy.

She was saving — for Curley.

She fought bravely against odds that grew heavier. Even Madame Merino blamed him. Jane championed him stoutly.

One great solace had Jane. Michael came to London. He had written his opera (Jane did not know of her share in it), and she talked to him of Curley as to a dear friend; and he (while he listened to her steadfast defence of him) guessed the truth, but knew

it not fully till one day when he met Nelly Chingford. Something in her face made him trust her. He had heard Jane speak of her kindness.

"You are a friend of hers?" he said.

"The best friend she's got — or perhaps she's the best friend that I have. It's the same thing."

"I'm a friend, too."

"I seem to remember your face."

He told her his name. "I was once in the orchestra at the Camberwell," he added.

"You," she said, "you!"

"I've rehearsed with you," Michael said. "I was utility then, and the drum was my instrument."

Nelly said, "Bless me!"

"Why, you once gave Curley Merino a thrashing," she cried, searching her memory.

Michael did not want to remember this, but he wanted to know about Jane.

"It began soon after they married," she told him. "Curley was n't bound long. He's as light as they make 'em — always was, from a boy, and the prettiest boy that I ever set eyes on. She worshipped him — worships him still. Sometimes I wonder, and sometimes I don't. Every one has to like Curley. Poor Curley, they say he drinks, too."

"Poor Jane," Michael said under his breath.

"Yes, poor little Jane. She never says a word. She won't hear a thing against him. She'd rather die than allow that he treated her badly. Did you know her well?"

"Yes — that is, no, not very, perhaps."

In his innermost heart he was thinking that he had known Jane through and through, from the first.

"She 's a strange little thing," pursued Miss Chingford. "I never noticed that she was particularly taken with Curley before she married him. Once she half owned that there had been somebody else."

Michael's face did not change.

"From the day of her marriage, however, Curley was the one person in the world. Some women are like that, Mr. Seaward, — p'r'aps a good many of us, — the first one we love that makes loves to us, whoever he is, — and most of us set our happiness on something that won't support it. Jenny has, and won't own it. She 'll wait and she 'll work and she 'll love to the end."

So Michael knew, too, though he heard Jane's defence of her husband. The seasons came and went, and Jane lived deserted. It was others who were angry, not she. It was Madame Merino who made scenes, and wept.

That roused little Jane.

"Oh," she said, "don't you understand? I 'm ready this minute to take him back if he comes to me, but he must come when he 's ready. If he does n't love me, you can't make him. I can't, no one can. It 's no good reproaching a person for ceasing to love you. If he loves me, some day he 'll come back — and he will. I know that, so I 'm waiting."

"It's a shame," Madame Merino said, "a shame! and he ought to be punished."

But of punishment Jane would not hear.

"Well, I'm speaking for you," said his mother. "It's you as the burden of all his wickedness falls on. I'm ashamed of him, that's what I am. When I think of what your life might be and what it is . . . and my son, too!"

"Don't fret about me," said Jane, more gently. "I shall be the gladder when he does come back, that's all."

"I can't make you out," said her mother-in-law.

Nor was Jane wholly unhappy. A certain calm had settled down upon her life. With Curley no longer beside her to show his aloofness, the pain it occasioned her became less insistent. Gradually her restlessness had subsided. A mention of his name could awake it; a paragraph in a paper chronicling his doings set her aching; for the most part, however, she did not suffer acutely. She had patience, and faith in some ultimate good. Her patience did not diminish, and her faith was not shaken. Curley would somehow come back in the end. So she kept to herself, and came and went quietly to and from "London" and Lambeth, a soberly clad little figure with a pale face and shining hair. She had memories, and an aim in her work. She was putting by money.

Michael was permanently in London now. She saw him often, and he spent many a happy hour in her company. Sometimes he played to her, sometimes

they talked merely. There was no one to make scandal, nor, had there been, would she have cared. She was waiting for Curley, he knew, and he had schooled himself to endurance.

So passed three years. Then it became known that the American troupe to which Curley had allied himself projected a visit to London.

Jane heard the news, and her colour came and went. For a while she was like one in a fever. Sometimes she put her hands to her heart as if she would calm its tumultuous beating. All her pain was renewed. She saw the day for his advent approach with an apprehension that was grievous. She did not believe that he was coming back to her yet. He had not written at this time for more than a year.

The Merinos, it chanced, to her unspeakable relief, had started on a long tour in the provinces, and she would be spared Madame Merino's well-meant intervention. No one should intervene. There should be no reproaches nor pleadings. The situation would be her own to deal with as she saw fit, and Jane had taken her line definitely. Curley, if he wanted her, would know where to find her . . .

Then, to evade, as far as might be, the questions and comments of her fellow-artists, however kindly intentioned, she kept to herself more closely even than before, and so arranged her comings and goings that the least possible time was spent by her at the music-halls where she was singing. She left home

only at the hours at which her work obliged her to do so, and bade Mrs. Kerridge deny her to any one who came to see her.

Two people guessed at her suffering, and respected her reticence.

The day came nearer; was reached; and Curley, she knew, was in London.

Jane's face wore the look of a thing that is hunted. Then Nelly Chingford spoke. The Americans had arrived the day before for rehearsals. She had heard that, for she was singing, it chanced, at the music-hall at which they were to appear that evening, and she came round to Jane.

"Shall I say anything to him?" she asked. "I shall see him to-night."

Jane's lips moved.

"See him to-night!" she was saying, "see him to-night!" as perhaps the dying thief on the cross may have repeated — "This day . . . in Paradise . . ."

She clung suddenly to Nelly, sobbing.

"Oh, Nelly!" she said. "Oh, Nelly!"

Nelly Chingford strained her to her bosom.

"My darling," she whispered, "my darling. I know — I know. It ought n't to have been Curley, my precious, but it 's not much use saying that now. Don't fret, little girl, we all love you."

"How long does he stay?" Jane asked, when she could speak.

"A fortnight."

Jane pressed her hands to her mouth and eyes.

"You did know?" she said. "I've told no one—never! Oh, Nelly, how shall I bear it?"

She sobbed for some moments. Nelly held her closer.

"Let me speak to him."

Jane shook her head.

"No," she said, and "No" and "No," and exacted a promise.

"It'd be worse for me if I knew," she said, "don't you see that?"

Nelly did not abuse him. She understood too well. She stroked the soft hair.

"You've promised," said Jane after a time.

"Yes," said Nelly, "I've promised."

She went her way.

Perhaps had Curley been alone, she would not have felt bound to keep her vow to the letter. But Curley was not alone; and she knew, when she saw him, how useless such speaking would be. He avoided her, and he did not join Jane.

CHAPTER XXXIII

TIME went on.

Jane's keenest suffering was over. The fortnight that saw Curley back in the same town with her had held it. Then had her nights and days been tortured. She and he did not meet face to face, but she caught a glimpse of him once in the street, and that night paced London, seeking escape from her anguish as Michael in like case had sought it.

But, presently, when she knew that her husband had gone with the troupe to the Continent, her pain abated. It was then that Elementary Jane, a developing Jane by this time, looking into her heart learnt a thing that was true. Why was she able to live calmly when Curley was quite away from her, and when the chance of meeting him did not exist? Then she was free from her torment, and could look back and look forward . . .

Inevitable that she should learn from such signs.

"My Curley . . ." she said. . . . "My Curley . . ."

She sought no longer to deceive others. Every one knew that Curley had not come back to her. (But no one must blame him.) The time was past for deceiving — past, even, perhaps, for deceiving herself. Curley and she had been wedded in body; their souls had not met.

She saw with clearer eyes — saw into the meaning

of things that once would have seemed to be meaningless. It was a Jane on a plane that was higher who waited for Curley, knowing his limits, than the Jane who had fought with him once by the hoardings. Life had expanded her outlook, and sharpened the look she turned inwards.

She judged not at all.

While her thoughts were engaged on the lessons experience had for her, there came to her the news that the Americans were about to pay a return visit to London. Her fever, she felt, would be renewed, and she set herself to face or to circumvent it.

She would have more control over herself, while this visit lasted, than before. Upon so much she determined; and that she might be less susceptible to the nervous apprehension that had walked beside her like a haunting spectre during the former sojourn of the American troupe in London, she did not seek to find out the exact dates of their approaching stay, but managed, indeed, to elude a knowledge of them.

The Merino Family were still away. Mrs. Kerridge was not a reader of papers, and Jane banished the "press" from her rooms.

So it happened that Curley and his colleagues arrived in London without her definite knowledge. She knew they were expected, but knew not precisely when, and she herself at this period was singing at two of the outlying halls. It was conceivable, she told herself, that (by closing her eyes and her ears) she might one day wake to find they had come and gone.

In this way she would be spared something of her distress.

The Americans had made a very favourable impression before, and a full house assembled to greet them. Their engagement, of course, was "exclusive." Nelly Chingford, back that day from a fortnight's rest and sea-air, and unable to keep away from a music-hall, looked in with Mr. Goldstein in the course of the evening to see their performance.

A box was put at her disposal, and in it, with Mr. Goldstein behind the curtain, she sat, a *grande dame* in her way, and looked about her, recognizing and recognized. People came now and then to exchange greetings with her. She gave news of Brighton, and mentioned an artist or two she had met.

She criticized freely.

The acrobats' number went up.

"Now for Master Curley," she said, and sighed, thinking of Jane.

A round of applause greeted the troupe.

She singled out Curley.

"Was there ever a prettier figure?" she asked, indicating him with her fan and a "Two from the right."

Mr. Goldstein had heard of him.

"And I must n't tell her that I 've seen him," said Nelly. She told him of poor Jane's intended attempt to avoid knowing her husband was in London. "It upsets her so," she added in explanation.

Curley had filled out considerably, but was shapely as ever. Nelly looked at him, and had knowledge

afresh of what Jane must suffer. She fell into reverie, following mechanically with her eyes the rhythmic movements of the troupe. Love was a plague and a furnace, she thought, and happiest those who kept out of it. Poor little Jane! She was recalled to more definite attention by an exclamation from Mr. Goldstein.

"What is it, Charlie?" she said.

"Look at him," he said sharply.

All was not well down below. What was wrong? There seemed to be a suppressed excitement in the air, and something of uneasiness. She looked at Curley. The rest of the troupe were eyeing him from time to time. One was seen to whisper to him.

"Half an inch — less, an eighth, and he'd have missed his hold," said Mr. Goldstein.

Nelly Chingford put up her opera-glass.

Curley, in truth, was moving unsteadily.

A voice called out, "Shame!" and another, "He's drunk," and a few people hissed.

Curley pulled himself together at once, and faced the house defiantly.

There was a momentary pause, but the troupe had its name to maintain, and the performance proceeded, more brilliantly, perhaps, for the misgiving of each that took part in it.

"Good Lord!" Nelly Chingford said, half under her breath. "They said so, Camden and Carson did. Why don't they stop him? Silly fools! He's never going to climb that . . ."

She broke off. The members of the troupe were

forming a pyramid. A nervous tremor passed over her as Curley, with set teeth, swung himself up to a place in it. A child should have followed — a little girl — but, as she advanced, again the ominous sibilant sound was heard through the house, and in obvious reluctance she hesitated. Curley looked round like a young god in anger, and then looking down peremptorily, he held out his hands for the child to climb up to him. The human tower rocked as he moved. He swayed of a sudden, failed to right himself, and fell heavily.

There was a spasmodic cry from the front. The curtain was lowered.

It was Nelly Chingford who sought Jane. He had pushed the Other from him, whoever she was, and had asked for his wife. The fall sobered him, but his injury was mortal.

They took him to Little Petwell Street when his case was pronounced hopeless. Jane watched by his bed day and night. The husband and wife had long talks. Once Jane spoke of the Other, asking if he would like to see her.

But he shook his head.

"Only you . . . loved me," he said.

His mother came up from Portsmouth. She forbore to reproach him. The time for reproaches was past, with the time for deceiving.

Jane was Curley's thought, and Jane and Jane. He knew how she had loved and waited.

"P'r'aps it's better," he said one day. She had thought he was sleeping.

"What's better, my darling?"

She laid her hand on his forehead.

"Better like this."

"Oh, Curley, my beautiful."

"Ah, that's good," he murmured, caressing her hand with his own, "that's good."

Thus he died in her arms, with her tears on his face, and so he came back to her.

Peace fell on Jane after that. She had gauged herself rightly. By degrees even her spirits revived. Colour found its way into her cheeks, and her looks returned to her. She was like a flower from which a blight has been removed. As there were people who said she was stingy, so now there were not wanting some who said she was heartless.

But Nelly Chingford knew Jane's heart—the Merinos knew it, too, Mrs. Kerridge, and one or two others, amongst whom was Michael.

THE END

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